



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

# THE GREAT BARBARIAN CONSPIRACY, 367AD

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# The Great Barbarian Conspiracy, 367AD

## Introduction

**Saxons, Scotti, Franks, Attacotti, Picts, Rebellious Britons & Renegade Roman Troops Overrun Hadrians Wall & Attack The Province Of Britannia.**

### 367AD

In 367 AD, during the reign of the **Emperor, Valentinian** the first, an event called the '**Great Barbarian Conspiracy**' occurred. A number of units of the Roman garrison on Hadrian's wall is said to have rebelled in the winter and allowed the **Picts** from Caledonia to enter the Roman Province. Tribes from Ireland, namely the **Scotti** and the **Attacotti** attacked the west coast below Hadrian's wall, whilst **Saxons and Franks** launched attacks from the continent against the east coast.

Several of the forts on Hadrian's wall, held by Loyal Roman troops were attacked and destroyed, including the great cavalry fort at Housesteads.

These raiding warbands attacked loyal Roman troops and towns across the north and east of the province. Cities were sacked and the populations were murdered, raped and enslaved.

It has also been suggested that Roman spies (**The Miles Arcani**) who had infiltrated many of the invading tribes had turned traitor to Rome and had been promised sanctuary and wealth for providing intelligence against their own side.

The '**Comes maritime tractus**' The commander of the British coastal areas is said to have been killed, in battle. His name was **Nectarides**. No other details are known.

**Fullofaudes**, The Duke of Britannia (**Dux Britanniarum**) overall commander of the military of the province, is said to have been captured or killed, but again no further details survive.

### 368AD

Early in 368 AD, the Imperial Roman relief force arrived in Britain. The Roman Commander was **Count Flavius Theodosius**. His son, and future Emperor, also called **Theodosius** accompanied him.

The following was recorded by one **Ammianus Marcellinus**.

There he divided his troops into many parts and attacked the predatory bands of the enemy, which were ranging about and were laden with heavy packs; quickly routing those who were driving along prisoners and cattle, he wrested from them the booty which the wretched tribute-paying people had lost. And when all this had been restored to them, except for a small part which was allotted to the wearied soldiers, he entered the city, which had previously been plunged into the greatest difficulties, but had been restored more quickly than rescue could have been expected, rejoicing and as if celebrating an ovation.

**Theodosius** restored order but the province would still be plagued by raids and rebellions.



**The Emperor Theodosius I**

Little is known of the sequence or circumstances which led to this dramatic event, namely because written accounts are sparse and any more detailed accounts have clearly not survived. But what can we deduce from the information that is available and can we build up a clearer understanding of this disastrous situation that occurred in the province of Britannia?

Late Roman Britain was divided into **five Dioceses** each under the control of provincial Vicars. There was a Chief Vicarius who held supreme authority and he was based in Londinium.

## The Five Dioceses

The Five Dioceses were –

1. In the South West was the diocese of **Britannia Prima** with its regional capital of **Corinium**. (Cirencester)
2. The South East Diocese was **Maxima Caesariensis** with its capital being **Londinium**. (London)
3. The Midlands was the Diocese of **Flavia Caesariensis** with the Capital being **Glenuvum**. (Lincoln)
4. The North-West was the Diocese of **Valentia** with its regional Capital being **Luguvallium**. (Carlisle)
5. The North East region was the Diocese of **Britannia Secunda** with **Eboracum** (York) being the Capital.

The Vicars in the Provinces of **Maxima Caesariensis** and **Valentia** held the titles of **Consularis**

The titles of the Vicars of the provinces of both **Britannia Secunda** and **Flavia Caesariensis** were called **Praeses**.

Each Diocese was further broken down into **Civitates**, namely administrative areas based on the ancient pre-existing Celtic tribal regions of which there were between 16 and 20.

There were three Military Commands, namely the **Comes Britanniarum (Count of the Britons)**, who was in charge of the field army, the **Comitatenses**.

The **Comes littoris Saxonici per Britanniam (The Count of the Saxon Shore)**.

This commander was responsible for the **Limitanei**, the Frontier troops.

The **Dux Britanniarum (Duke of the Britons)** was based at York and controlled the troops who manned Hadrian's wall. Though inferior to the **Comes Britanniarum** he faced the very difficult task of guarding the northern border, which was threatened on several occasions by the **Picts**

It is likely that the Roman garrisons in Britain had decreased over the previous decade due to internal strife within the Empire, with troops being recalled to the Continent or being used by Usurper Emperors for their expeditions and there are some inferences that moral was low within the late Roman army and especially amongst the troops stationed on Hadrian's wall.

### 350 AD

Some 17 years earlier, in 350 AD, a Roman Commander of Germanic descent, namely one **Magentius** usurped the Western Empire's throne. In the ensuing civil war **Magentius** removed troops from Britain. **Magentius** was eventually defeated but the garrisons of Britannia appears not to have been re-strengthened and the province was becoming an attractive target for Barbarian raiders.

After the demise of Magentius, one Paulus Catena was sent by the Western Emperor, Constantius, to route out any lingering support for the usurper and to arrest some of his known supporters. The extreme methods used by Catena who arrested several people without any evidence and then subjected them to various forms of torture and execution caused the Vicarius of Britannia, Flavius Martinus to intervene. Catena then accused Martinus and several other Roman military commanders of Britannia of treason, again with no evidence. Martinus, in a rage attacked Catena but failed to kill him. Martinus then committed suicide in order to avoid arrest.

### Catena

**Catena** was recalled to Gaul but over the coming years his inquisitions throughout the Empire and his methods of using torture and false accusations eventually brought about his own demise and he was arrested and subsequently executed in 362 AD, by being burned alive.

**Catena's** activities had certainly demoralised the Roman army in Britannia and especially that of the garrison on Hadrian's wall. The wrongs that he had initiated had not been put right and this would have severe consequences in 367 AD.

The Garrison on Hadrian's wall is believed to have collaborated with the Barbarian tribes as did the Arcani. No details are known but the Barbarian tribes attacked from the east and the west and from north of the wall. The wall was badly damaged and many of its forts were destroyed. Some sources suggest that the Roman Garrison joined the Barbarian invasion.

The Barbarians raided deep into the province. At least one full scale battle took place, in which the **Comes maritime tractus', Nectarides**, was killed.





**44<sup>th</sup> century Roman ridge helmet.**

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The province suffered for a year, with towns and cities being attacked and destroyed. Loyal Roman garrisons remained on the defensive protecting forts and some towns but they were in no position to launch any counter attack.

When the relieving Imperial army finally arrived the task of destroying the Barbarian tribes began in earnest. The raiding parties were systematically hunted down and destroyed. The Roman fleet would likely have patrolled the eastern coast, intercepting, any Saxon and Frankish ships and eliminating the threat from the continent.



**Housesteads fort today from above.**

It took **Theodosius a** year to restore order but the province had suffered severe damage. Hadrian's wall would not be restored for several years. The Romans tried to strengthen the defences of the province by building watch towers and restoring earlier fortifications but the reality was, that the Empire was in rapid decline and was under ever increasing pressure from the Barbarian tribes of the East.

The Roman military would eventually be withdrawn from Britain in about 410 AD and this would be the beginning of the long war for the province of Britannia.

## **The Barbarian tribes of the great conspiracy**

### **The Scotti**

The name was first attested in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. It was the Latin name for the Gaels, who initially came from Ireland. It is believed that the Scotti were descended from the Picts who had invaded Ireland in about 200 AD. These Irish Scots, would in turn, settle parts of the North Western coast of what would become Scotland in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### **The Attacotii**

It is a subject of debate as to who these people were and as to where they originated from. Ancient sources are sparse but it appears that they first appeared in Roman records sometime in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century. It was claimed by Saint Jerome in his writings that they were extremely fierce and that they practised cannibalism and polyandry. Whether this is true or not cannot be verified. It is believed that this tribe had originated in Ireland.

### **The Saxons.**

A group of Germanic peoples who originated on the north coast of what is now Germany. The Romans, both fought them and employed them as mercenary troops. They along with the related peoples, Jutes and Angles, would become the dominant people in Southern and Eastern Britain following the fall of the Roman Empire. Their wars with the Romano-British would last for centuries.

### **The Franks**

Another Germanic people who would eventually form the kingdom of Frankia and form the Merovingian dynasty and Empire which would evolve into the Carolingian dynasty and would see one of its Kings, Charlamagne, crowned as the Holy Roman Emperor.

### **The Picts.**

An indigenous British people who occupied the area north of the Forth and Clyde rivers. The name Picti first appears in Roman sources in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and it meant 'Painted People'. This pertained to the Picts fondness for tattoos which had always been a trait of the Celts of Britain. They were most likely an amalgamation of Northern British tribes, namely the **Verturiones**, **Taexali** and **Venicones** who the Romans had originally called Caledonians.

The Picts would outlast the Romans in Britain and would endure wars against the Romano-British, Angles, Saxons, Scots and Vikings until they eventually merged with the Scottish people of Alba and the future Kingdom of Scotland.

The Great Barbarian Conspiracy of 367 AD is one of the most dramatic events of early British history but it is also, equally mysterious.