



Limitanei and *Comitatenses*: Military Failure at the End of Roman Britain?

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ABSTRACT

Presumptions of military failure at the end of Roman Britain are a recurring feature of many modern accounts. While there is some support in ancient sources for the withdrawal of soldiers from Britain in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, archaeological evidence also suggests activity at many Roman military sites in the fifth century. A review of the military history as suggested by Roman sources, as well as a consideration of the organisation of both the late Roman military and fourth-century Britain, promotes a regional approach to interpreting military archaeology and history in the final years of Roman Britain, with particular emphasis on the distinct military commands in the diocese.

There is no single cause or simple explanation for the end of Roman Britain, but the presumption of military failure is a recurring feature of many accounts that warrants a reconsideration of the fate of the soldiers defending Britain in the early fifth century. The underlying assumptions for military failure have varied, from the straightforward total withdrawal of soldiers, to the collapse of the infrastructure that supplied any remaining soldiers. A model was proposed suggesting that the armies of the diocese of Britain were too small through the fourth century to have suffered many, if any, troop withdrawals (James 1984), but the size of the estimated force in the model may have been too conservative, and there does seem to be evidence of some withdrawal of soldiers in the final decades of Roman Britain.

Excavations in the northern frontier over the past 30 years, however, have demonstrated continued activity at a number of late Roman military installations into the fifth century, and in some cases later. A model arguing for the transformation of late Roman military units into sub-Roman warbands has been proposed (Casey 1993; Wilmott 1997; Collins 2012), but thus far the model has only been applied to evidence from the northern frontier. The military situation at the end of Roman Britain for the entire diocese has been considered in focused discussions of 'the end' (e.g. Dark 2000; Esmonde Cleary 1989; Faulkner 2004) or in more general accounts of Roman Britain (e.g. Millett 1990; Mattingly 2006). In such treatments, the military garrison of the island has been portrayed in a generic fashion as an imperial institution at a broader geographic scale, as it relates to other structural aspects of Roman imperial government. However, an examination of the late Roman military commands of *Britannia* reveals likely geographic patterning, further reinforcing the plethora of evidence for the significance of regionality in Roman and post-Roman Britain. This paper provides a brief overview of the structure of the late Roman army and its disposition in Britain, followed by a consideration of reasons for military failure or continuity. The archaeological evidence is reviewed geographically to test the notion of continued military presence c. A.D. 400.

THE FOURTH-CENTURY ROMAN ARMY

The late Roman army was structurally and operationally different to that of the early Roman Empire. This evolution occurred throughout the third century, but changes were formalised under Diocletian, Constantine and subsequent emperors, and there is no evidence that the 'fighting quality' of the late Roman army diminished. A number of general studies provide a

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fuller discussion of the late Roman military that it is not necessary to repeat here (Southern and Dixon 1996; Elton 1997; Nicasie 1998; Whitby 2007), but a few points are worth noting, given the impact that this has on an understanding of the end of Roman Britain.

The most fundamental change was the formal separation of field armies, *comitatenses*, from fixed frontier troops, *limitanei*. The field army soldiers received higher pay and are more frequently found in Roman writers' accounts than their frontier-based *commilitones* ('fellow soldiers'), suggesting that the field army soldiers were superior; however, this status distinction is probably exaggerated by modern scholars and our own preconceptions. Higher pay for field army soldiers, for example, can be explained as an incentive for soldiers who were required to leave home and live a more itinerant lifestyle. Furthermore, the mobility of field army units meant that they will not have benefited from the time-tested supply mechanisms that frontier soldiers relied on; in such circumstances, higher pay may also have related to a higher cost of living. That said, the late Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus perceived the *limitanei* as more localised and occasionally unreliable, though notably not incompetent (Crump 1969). The most significant distinction to make between the *comitatenses* and the *limitanei* is probably one of deployment, as it relates to the operational mission of these soldiers. The *limitanei* policed and defended the frontier, acting in smaller units, often independently, and probably benefited from long-term deployment; the *comitatenses* were an active campaigning force and more likely to work in concert with other units. In this light, while the *comitatenses* were more likely to have participated in larger battles and would have been trained for this form of warfare, the *limitanei* probably experienced smaller-scale, low-intensity warfare such as raiding more frequently. To compare very loosely with modern deployment of the British Army, the *limitanei* were operationally more similar to forces that were in Northern Ireland, while the *comitatenses* were employed in a fashion more similar to the war in Afghanistan, with considerable implications regarding the way in which these different soldiers interacted and were received by the rest of society.

The field and frontier armies were under the command of counts (*comites*) and dukes (*duces*), respectively, with individual units commanded by tribunes, prefects, and the more generic 'commander' (*praepositus*). The overall size of the army was larger in the fourth century than in the second and third century, but individual units were smaller (Nicasie 1998). The legion of the Principate consisted of a paper strength of 5,500; the legion of the Dominate was probably around 1,000 strong. Auxiliary cohorts with a nominal strength of 500 were replaced by other types of units estimated to be 200–300 men strong or even smaller. The *Notitia Dignitatum* lists the civil and military offices throughout the Eastern and Western Empires, and often, as is the case with frontier units, the headquarters or primary base of the officer is named. This has enabled military historians to consider (with varying success) the deployment and operation of the late Roman army c. A.D. 395/425 (e.g. Hodgson 1991 and Hassall 2004 for Britain), but the *Notitia* as a source remains problematic.

Wherever possible, a fort drew its supplies from the local countryside, as it did during the Principate, but the changed tax structure of the Later Empire further facilitated this. By the late fourth century, three quarters of a soldier's salary was paid in kind and only one quarter in cash. This was supplemented regularly with imperial donatives, and it has been argued that the fourth-century soldier was probably on an equivalent salary to the second-century soldier, assuming he received his donatives (Brickstock 2010). Recruits were also provided locally, but the extent to which the state relied on conscription is uncertain, as there are no recorded figures for voluntary enlistment, and the sons of soldiers had a legal obligation to serve following Tetrarchic reforms. Recent studies have also emphasised that claims of barbarisation in the fourth century are exaggerated, and it is not until the fifth century that there are considerable proportions (>25 per cent) of barbarians present in the army, with a bias toward the field armies (Elton 1997, 272–7). This means that frontier units were more likely to be formed by men from the region of deployment, either sons of soldiers or recruits and conscripts from the region, as well as men of barbarian extraction local to that frontier. With these basic facts in mind, we can now turn to the situation in Britain.

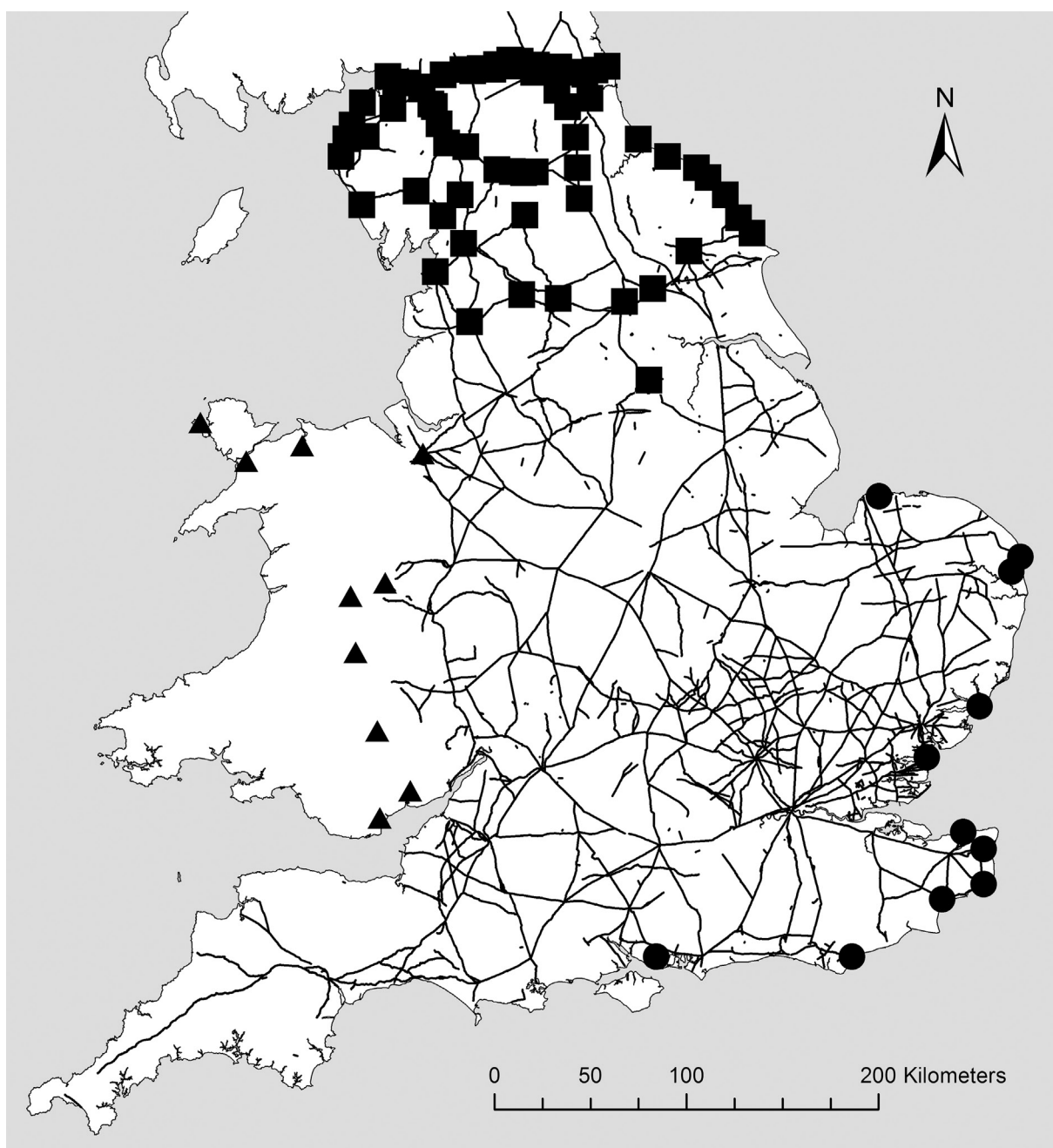


FIG. 1. A map of late fourth-/early fifth-century military sites in *Britannia*, separated by military command. Squares indicate sites under the command of the *dux Britanniarum*; circles indicate sites under the command of the *comes litoris Saxonici*; triangles are sites occupied in Wales, which may have been under a separate command.

THE ROMAN MILITARY IN BRITAIN *c.* A.D. 400

The *Notitia Dignitatum* names three military commands in Britain (FIG. 1): the *comes Britanniarum* (Count of the Britains, the general of the British field army); the *comes litoris Saxonici* (Count of the Saxon Shore for south-east Britain); and the *dux Britanniarum* (Duke of the Britains for the northern frontier); the rank of count was senior to duke and the titles accordingly reflect the relative importance of the three commands. There are possibly missing sections from the *Notitia* specific to Britain. For example, there are no recorded *foederati* or barbarian units sworn to serve Rome as there are for other dioceses in the West. Nor are any Welsh forts named or accounted for. In fact, there are a number of sites known to have been occupied *c.* A.D. 400 which are not

listed in the *Notitia*, probably for a number of reasons: there may have been site abandonment before the *Notitia* was compiled, or an outpostting of vexillations across a number of installations, or occupation by barbarian *foederati* (Collins 2012, 48–51). Recently, the argument for a fourth military command in western Britain has been restated by White (2007, 57–9), which he calls the *comes tractus maritimis per Britannias* (Count of the Coastal Zones for Britain) following the account of the ‘barbarian conspiracy’ provided by Ammianus Marcellinus (27.8; 28.3).

From the number of units listed in the *Notitia*, and using an estimated unit strength (measured in terms of soldiers), it can reasonably be surmised that there were somewhere in the range of 12,000–30,000 soldiers present in Britain c. A.D. 400 (Table 1). Again, it must be emphasised that this is a somewhat dubious exercise as we cannot confidently assign unit strength based solely on a unit’s name, and there are always possibilities that there are unattested barbarian units or missing sections of the *Notitia*. But these figures offer a rough guideline to the strength of the army in the diocese (see Nicasie 1998, 76 and Elton 1997, 99–100 for a fuller discussion of unit strengths). Significance should not be attached strictly on the basis of an estimated paper strength, as the different operational roles of the military commands are likely to be reflected in the numbers. The British field army, for example, was small compared to the field armies of other dioceses in the Western Empire. This may suggest a priority on rapid movement throughout Britain facilitated by a smaller number of soldiers; perhaps the British field army had a simpler role of reinforcing existing frontier commands rather than actively pursuing offensive campaigns. Another possibility is that the barbarian threat was constant but not substantial. It is also not known if the Saxon Shore units would have included sailors and naval personnel, and to what extent this would increase or decrease estimated unit strengths. For the purposes of this exercise it seems safe to assume that Saxon Shore units were roughly the same size as other frontier units. The total can also be boosted by prospective missing units. That said, most units were under their paper strength (Breeze 1984), and a conservative but more realistic estimate may be in the order of some 12,000–20,000 soldiers.

TABLE 1. Calculations of the size of the military forces by command from the *Notitia Dignitatum*, based on differing estimates of unit strength. These numbers represent a paper strength that was probably only rarely achieved in reality.

Command	No. & type of units	James (1984, 166)		Elton (1997, 89–100)		Nicasie (1998, 74)	
		Unit size	Totals	Unit size	Totals	Unit size	Totals
<i>dux Britann.</i>	1 legion	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	3,000	3,000
	9 cavalry	100	900	480	4,320	350	3,150
	27 infantry	100	2,700	480	12,960	300	8,100
	2 naval	100	200	480	960	300	600
	Total:		4,800		19,240		14,850
<i>comes litoris Saxonici</i>	1 legion	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	3,000	3,000
	2 cavalry	100	200	480	960	350	700
	7 infantry	100	700	480	3,360	300	2,100
	Total:		1,900		5,320		5,800
<i>comes Britann.</i>	1 aux. palatina	1,000	1,000	1,200	1,200	800	800
	1 legion	1,000	1,000	1,200	1,200	1,200	1,200
	1 infantry	500	500	800	800	500	500
	6 cavalry	500	3,000	400	2,400	400	2,400
	Total:		5,500		5,600		4,900

Limited in utility these figures may be, but they do offer a rough guideline to the prospective manpower tasked with the defence of *Britannia* or that could serve as a pool for redeployment elsewhere in the Empire.

SOLDIERS REMOVED, SOLDIERS ADDED

There are a number of historical circumstances and events that may have significantly reduced the garrison of Britain, and these must be considered critically for any argument of military failure or evidence for continuity. There are six recorded instances in which a field army and general were dispatched from the Continent to deal with barbarian incursions in Britain, usually from the Picts, which may refer specifically to barbarians north of the Forth-Clyde area of Scotland or serve as a generic *topos* for all Britons living to the north of the Wall.

The military failure of Britain in the early fifth century is generally related to the numbers or quality of soldiers that remained on the island. The low numbers or inferior quality of the soldiers are justified in relation to major military and political events. It is worth examining these in brief to consider the full extent to which they can be taken to indicate a net loss of soldiers. In addition to the episodes considered, there are always the normal reasons for attrition due to retirement, illness, accident, and casualties.

The so-called 'barbarian conspiracy' of A.D. 367 is a major event in fourth-century Britain. Regardless of the scale of barbarian invasion or the rebellion led by a political exile, Count Theodosius seems to have reorganised the military and administration of *Britannia* in A.D. 368/369, probably adding fortlets to the coast of Yorkshire and perhaps elsewhere at this time. This is consistent with the emperor Valentinian's policies and practices on the Continent, particularly with regard to frontiers (Breeze 2011, 171). This can be taken to mean a restoration or refurbishment of military and urban defences and an influx of new soldiers, either to existing units or introducing entirely new units.

The next major events are related to Magnus Maximus, who as *comes* led an army in Britain to an important victory over the Picts in A.D. 382. His success was such that in A.D. 383, he proclaimed himself emperor and set off for the Continent to extend his dominion across the West. Magnus Maximus certainly removed soldiers from Britain, but it is not known which ones. His army could have been composed of detachments accumulated from across the island, or a few entire units. A more likely possibility is that Maximus was serving a temporary command at the behest of the emperor rather than one of the permanent frontier commands (James 1984, 170). In this case, he probably brought a field army with him from the Continent that served as the core of his force.

In A.D. 392, another usurper, Eugenius, was raised in Gaul with British support. However, it is unknown, in quantitative terms, to what extent Britain supported this usurper. Both Maximus and Eugenius were defeated in turn by the emperor Theodosius I, but at a cost. Any soldiers from Britain were probably absorbed by Theodosius into his own army, or redeployed on the Continent, rather than being sent back to their original post. Rankov (2009) has noted the consistency with which emperors visited or sent trusted agents to provinces that supported usurpers. In part, this relates to punishment of the usurpers' supporters and bolstering the imperial coffers through reclamation of the wealth and estates of such rebels. However, an imperial visit also brings the benefits of imperial wealth, gifts and favours, further securing loyalty. It is in this context, in the aftermath of the usurpations of Maximus and Eugenius, that we should consider the foundation of the British field army, generally credited to Theodosius or his heir in the West, Honorius and his *generalissimo* Stilicho.

There were also campaigns directed by Stilicho against the Picts in the late 390s, though it is unknown if Stilicho actually travelled to Britain himself. These provided a further opportunity to make new political and military appointments as well as to reorganise the frontier, particularly as sources indicate (though these could be rhetorical rather than factual) that Stilicho withdrew 'legions' from furthest Britain for the defence of continental interests in A.D. 400/401. This may have been the British field army as listed in the *Notitia*, or perhaps a separate field army that was in Britain to campaign against the Picts. Another possibility is that the campaigning army may have been a larger force, and that the British field army is the remnant of this larger army, following the withdrawal of soldiers in A.D. 400/401. Yet another possibility is that detachments were taken from frontier units.

The final event relates to the barbarian crossing of the Rhine just after Christmas of A.D. 405,

on the modern date of New Year's Eve. In response, Britain elected three usurpers in succession. Only the last of these, Constantine III (A.D. 407–411), remained in power long enough to accomplish anything. He went to the Continent and set about establishing himself in the Western Empire. He must have taken soldiers with him, though exactly which ones is uncertain. The British field army is the most likely candidate, assuming it was still in place following withdrawals by Stilicho five years previously.

This review of the fourth and fifth century shows that there are two certain instances of the removal of soldiers from Britain, under Magnus Maximus and Constantine III. A third probable removal occurred under Stilicho in A.D. 400/401, and there may also have been a withdrawal of soldiers to support Eugenius *c.* A.D. 392. There are two periods of central imperial attention that probably resulted in a reorganisation of the military garrison of Britain, following the 'barbarian conspiracy' and in the 390s when the British field army was formed and Stilicho directed campaigns against the Picts. Unfortunately, there are no figures available for the soldiers taken from or added to Britain.

Another group to factor into this picture are barbarian settlers. James (1984) noted some years ago that Britain was a dumping ground for barbarian communities, for example a force of Alammani under Valentinian, *c.* A.D. 372. Barbarians were often settled on the condition that they provided recruits for the army, and these settlements may have been meant to supplement normal recruitment for the British garrisons. Barbarians, however, were also the preferred option when an army needed to be formed rapidly or when fighting a civil war. So any barbarian settlements in Britain would have been a desirable recruiting pool for Magnus Maximus and Constantine III, not to mention Eugenius.

While the episodes highlighted may have removed a considerable number of soldiers from Britain between A.D. 367 and 411, there are a number of reasons suggesting that the removal of soldiers will have been countered. Part of a frontier army commander's (the *dux*) and unit commanders' duties was to maintain effective unit strength and defences, and there is no reason to think that this was not the case most of the time. Usurpers may have taken some soldiers, but it is highly unlikely they would have taken all or the majority of soldiers, leaving only the worst ones behind. Given the long-standing stationing of many units in Britain (often for more than three generations) in the frontier commands, it is likely that there were strong social and economic ties to the locality and region of posting. Such ties would have made soldiers reticent to leave Britain, and they may have required further persuasion and incentive from usurpers or imperial authorities. And whatever the aspirations of would-be emperors, there was still a continued barbarian threat from the west, north, and east/south-east that required some military presence.

Part of the difficulty in determining any military failure for Britain in the early fifth century is that Britain is treated as a single entity, despite the fact that there are three, possibly four, late Roman military commands in Britain. Looking at the evidence for each command is the best means of analysing military occupation of late Roman Britain, as it allows us to include the copious archaeological data to address questions of continued site occupation or abandonment, and the nature of such occupation.

THE COMES BRITANNIARUM

As stated above, the British field army is probably a late introduction that is best attributed to a reorganisation following the usurpation of Eugenius by either Theodosius or Stilicho in the 390s. Another possible origin is for the field army to have been composed of the remainder of Stilicho's army from the Pictish campaign of *c.* A.D. 398–401. In either case, there is no archaeological footprint associated with the field army. Like other field armies on the Continent, the British field army units were probably not assigned to specific forts as permanent quarters; they would have spent the campaigning season supporting one or more frontier commands and the winter months quartered in cities. There is no clear artefact type or assemblage that distinguished the *comitatenses* from the *limitanei*, or even clearly distinguished 'soldiers' from 'civilians' (Cool 2010). It is possible that some of the forts with known late fourth-/early fifth-century occupation

in northern and western *Britannia* were occupied by the British *comitatenses*, but so far there is nothing to distinguish occupation at these sites as anything different from that of other forts in these regions. The British field army, therefore, cannot even be demonstrably proven to exist from archaeological evidence. We must trust the fact of its existence to the *Notitia*. That said, this is the most likely body of soldiers that Constantine III would have drawn his army from to support his usurpation.

THE COMES LITORIS SAXONICI

The Saxon Shore system was established in the third century and was initially integrated with forts along the north coast of Gaul, but this large, cross-Channel command was broken up into two or three commands following Constantius Chlorus' recovery of Carausius' break-away empire in A.D. 296. The British Saxon Shore command probably remained the same as it appears in the *Notitia* throughout the fourth and early fifth century.

It is difficult to say with great confidence the extent to which any of the Saxon Shore forts were occupied in the early fifth century and beyond (Collins 2012, 144). There is reasonable evidence that perhaps four forts at Lympne, Reculver, Caister, and Burgh Castle were abandoned by the early fifth century, even if some of these also have evidence for early Anglo-Saxon activity. Activity post-dating the early fifth century has been encountered at Portchester, Brancaster, Bradwell, Dover, and Richborough, though this evidence is not always understood. Portchester, for example, had 'intensive disordered occupation' in the second half of the fourth century, followed by a phase of 'disordered occupation', leaving the excavator questioning if any of this was military occupation (Cunliffe 1975, 425). At Richborough, the largest quantity of the latest Roman bronze coinage in all of Britain has been found, as well as a church (Brown 1971; Reece 2010, 62). Richborough was clearly an important site, but we do not understand its fifth-century archaeology.

WALES

A military command for Wales has been proposed, with its headquarters at the legionary fortress at Chester (White 2007, 57–9). However, no formal military command has previously been attested in the late Roman west of Britain, making assessment of official imperial arrangements speculative.

Military occupation at the legionary fortress of Chester seems to continue into the early fifth century, and possibly beyond (Mason 2012). A second legionary fortress at Caerleon has been claimed to have been occupied by squatters in the fourth century, though recent excavations may demonstrate the nature of the latest occupation more clearly (Gardner 1999; Casey 2010). Existing forts at Caernarfon and Caerhun continued to be occupied to c. A.D. 400/410, though perhaps with reduced activity and without any reasonable evidence for later fifth-century occupation. New fortifications were built adjacent to the coast at Caernarfon and at Caer Gybi, the latter presumably linked to a tower on Holyhead Mountain, in north-west Wales and at Cardiff, which were all also occupied until c. A.D. 400/410. Otherwise, there is an interesting lack of western coastal defences in Wales, despite the likely Irish origins of most raiders. There is very little evidence for fifth-century occupation or activity at the military sites in Wales, and those sites that do exhibit such evidence are found in the east of the region, including the town of Wroxeter. Two significant points may relate to this. Early medieval traditions link royal lineages of various Welsh kingdoms to either Magnus Maximus or Cunedda Wledig, a tribal chief of the Votadini of Lothian. Furthermore, the élite sites of the fifth-century and later West are hillforts. This may suggest that the final decades of Roman Britain may have seen the emergence of native warrior-aristocrats and their warbands rather than relying solely upon official defence by the Roman army. On the other hand, if the Votadini are to be linked with the North Tyne valley rather than Lothian (Breeze 2013), then the Cunedda tradition may relate to military re-deployment from one frontier sector to another. Casey (2010) links the military withdrawal from Wales to the usurpation of Eugenius.

THE *DUX BRITANNIARUM*

In contrast to the Saxon Shore and western Britain, the northern frontier provides the clearest evidence for the continued occupation of a number of forts in the fifth century. Interestingly, the northern forts were not rebuilt or redesigned to incorporate the latest defensive architecture, seen in the other frontiers of the Empire, suggesting that the forts themselves were under no greater direct threat than they were when initially constructed in the second century. Indeed, the comparison is remarkable for at those forts where the defences were renewed in the late fourth or fifth century, the work consisted of the creation of an earthen bank. All the forts of northern England were under the command of the *dux Britanniarum*, a command that was probably established in the first half of the fourth century; a case has been made for a sub-Roman command of similar scale if not directly descended from the office (Dark 1992).

Occupation and activity dated to the fifth century are known at a handful of military sites: the legionary fortress and presumed seat of the *dux*'s command at York; Malton; Piercebridge; Binchester; South Shields; probably Newcastle; Housesteads; Vindolanda; Birdoswald; possibly Stanwix; and Carlisle. The evidence from these sites can generally be summarised as a structural stratigraphic sequence that continues reasonably beyond a *terminus post quem* of c. A.D. 400/410, discussed in more detail elsewhere (Birley, this publication; Collins 2012; Wilmott and Wilson 2000). Evidence of a more suggestive nature for fifth- and sixth-century occupation and activity can be traced to artefacts, inscriptions and mortuary activity at a number of additional forts. Of further significance is the continued occupation of smaller military installations until the early fifth century and perhaps beyond, for example at the Yorkshire coastal fortlets and at milecastles along the length of Hadrian's Wall. Ceramic and coin assemblages from across the frontier under the command of the *dux* are relatively similar to each other, further reinforcing the interpretation of supply directed from a single office and continuing until at least A.D. 400/410. A generous interpretation of the distribution of all fifth- and sixth-century activity suggests that the majority of these forts continued to be occupied in the post-Roman centuries. Those sites not exhibiting early post-Roman evidence may be explained from their lack of modern archaeological attention. The intensity of occupation in the fifth-century northern frontier can be debated, but there is a case to be made for the continued military occupation and post-Roman evolution or fragmentation of the *dux* command.

CONCLUSIONS

How are we to understand the differences and similarities between these different commands? In this paper, it has not been possible to discuss the structural archaeology in detail, but it is worth emphasising the changed nature of the late fourth-century structures. They were not uniform stone-built structures, but more hybrid in their plan and construction. The execution of many structures, particularly barracks, in timber means that the latest Roman military archaeology is more ephemeral, and far more prone to disturbance and destruction than a stone foundation. In this sense, all three commands/areas of military occupation are similar, though artefact assemblages varied regionally, particularly in terms of ceramics.

There is credible evidence for the abandonment of approximately half of the Saxon Shore forts in the late fourth/early fifth century, with uncertain roles in the following decades. Abandonment of the western forts is thought to date to c. A.D. 400/410, with practically no information about the fifth-century use of these sites with the exception of Chester and possibly Caerleon. The Welsh forts, however, would benefit from more modern excavation. The northern frontier, in contrast, seems to indicate that at least half and very possibly the majority of all forts were occupied and continued to have élite functions in the fifth century.

The conclusions offered here are speculative, but considering the context and differences in general settlement between the regions these commands occupied, we can make some informed suggestions, particularly when considered with further evidence of unit redeployment suggested by the *Notitia Dignitatum* (Table 2). Using the *Notitia* to track unit deployment and redeployment is difficult at best, and so only the most probable instances are included in Table 2. The field

TABLE 2. Probable/possible redeployments of units from British forts/commands suggested by the *Notitia Dignitatum*. Inconsistencies within the document make interpretation difficult, and only those units with probable redeployment are listed.

Unit		Occurrence elsewhere	Interpretation
dux Britanniarum, NDOc. XI	21. Praefectus equitum catafractariorum, Morbio	<i>Equites catafractarii</i> under the <i>comes Britanniarum</i> (NDOc. VII.200)	The heavy cavalry is probably transferred to the authority of the <i>comes Britanniarum</i>
	25. Praefectus numeri exploratorum, Lavatres	<i>Numerus exploratorum</i> , <i>Portus Adurni</i> under the <i>comes litoris Saxonici</i> (NDOc. XXVIII.21) Also <i>legio pseudocomitatenses exploratores in Gallia</i> under <i>magister equitum Galliarum</i> (NDOc. VII.110)	The unit may have been transferred from Bowes to Portchester under the command of the <i>comes litoris Saxonici</i> , and then withdrawn from the Saxon Shore possibly by Constantine III, when it was raised to the field army and fell under the authority of the <i>magister equitum Galliarum</i> following the defeat of Constantine III
Wales	Uncertain unit of <i>limitanei</i> , probably an old-fashioned auxiliary unit	<i>Auxilia palatina Seguntenses</i> under the <i>comites Illyrici</i> (NDOc. VII.49)	Removal of the unit partially or wholly to support the usurpation of Magnus Maximus, Eugenius, or Constantine III
comes litoris Saxonici, NDOc. XXVIII	19. Praefectus legionis secundae Augustae (<i>Rutupis</i> supplied from insignia)	<i>Secundani iuniores</i> under the <i>comes Britanniarum</i> (NDOc. VII.156) <i>Legio comitatenses secundani Britones</i> under the <i>magister equitum Galliarum</i> (NDOc. VII.84)	Removal of the legion from Caerleon to Richborough under the authority of the <i>comes litoris Saxonici</i> , after which a vexillation may have formed the core of a unit for the <i>comes Britanniarum</i> ; the unit may have been withdrawn from Richborough by Constantine III, and was raised to the status of <i>legio comitatensis</i> , falling under the authority of the <i>magister equitum Galliarum</i> following the defeat of Constantine III
	20. Praepositus numeri Abulcaum (<i>Anderitis</i> supplied from insignia)	<i>Abulci</i> in <i>Gallia</i> under the <i>magister equitum Galliarum</i> (NDOc. VII.109) <i>Classis Aneretianorum</i> at Paris under the <i>magister militum praesentalis a parte peditum</i>	Removal of unit partially or wholly possibly by Constantine III, where it fell under the authority of the <i>magister equitum Galliarum</i> following the defeat of Constantine III The fleet/naval element of the garrison at Pevensey is separated from the parent unit, probably following the defeat of Constantine III when the unit helped to move troops across the Channel
	21. Praepositus numeri exploratorum, Portus Adurni	<i>Explatores</i> in <i>Gallia</i> under the <i>magister equitum Galliarum</i> (NDOc. VII.110)	Following a possible transfer from Bowes to Portchester, the Saxon Shore unit was withdrawn possibly by Constantine III, when it fell under the authority of the <i>magister equitum Galliarum</i> following the defeat of Constantine III
comes Britanniarum, NDOc. VII	154. Victores iuniores Britannicani	<i>Auxilia palatina victores iuniores</i> in Spain under the <i>comes Hispaniae</i> (NDOc. VII.126)	Withdrawal from Britain under Constantine III and sent to Spain to campaign with his son, when he was defeated
	156. Secundani iuniores	<i>Legio comitatenses secundani Britones</i> under the <i>magister equitum Galliarum</i> (NDOc. VII.84)	This unit was probably formed from a vexillation of the unit under the command of the <i>comes litoris Saxonici</i> . It is probably not the same as the unit attested at NDOc. VIII.84
	202. Equites Honoriani seniores	<i>Equites Honoriani seniores</i> in Gaul under the <i>magister equitum Galliarum</i> (NDOc. VII.171) <i>Equites Honoriani seniores</i> in Spain under the command of Constantine III (Orosius 7.40)	This unit was withdrawn from Britain under Constantine III, though it is uncertain if its occurrence under the <i>magister equitum Galliarum</i> predates or postdates its posting in Britain

army may have been removed to the Continent with usurpers. On the other hand, the units of the Saxon Shore were closest to the Continent and presumably possessed sea-going vessels, and they would have been most accessible to usurpers or continental authorities. It seems feasible that the Saxon Shore was considerably reduced in strength by Constantine III, who may have also removed the field army. This would have effectively diminished, if not altogether removed, a professional military élite in south-east *Britannia*, rendering it vulnerable to Saxon piracy, and contributing to the context for Anglo-Saxon settlement either as invasive colonists or as contracted *foederati*. The West of Britain was never as intensively Romanised as the South-East, nor was it extensively occupied by a military force throughout the Roman period, in contrast to the North. Defence of the West in that final decade of Roman rule may have been a mix of regular frontier units and tribal militias, either those of the local élite or perhaps of Irish or Pictish *foederati* (Rance 2001). This scenario may explain the predominance of hillforts as the élite form of settlement in the West while towns and possibly villas retained their significance in the East. In contrast, the garrison of the North may have been reduced in strength through the course of the later fourth century, but it does not seem to have been withdrawn completely, which may be understandable given both the protracted menace of the Picts through the fourth century and its distance from continental authorities. Military forces and authorities probably remained in place, with Roman commanders and their soldiers effectively becoming local warlords and warbands; this seems to be supported by the fact that in the northern frontier zone, Roman forts seem to be the primary sites of élite activity (FIG. 2).

Admittedly, these are speculations based on unequal archaeological evidence. While this interpretation does not challenge the general notion of the end of Roman Britain and the eventual rise of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, it does offer some explanation for the regional variation of post-Roman Britain. There was not a military failure in *Britannia* so much as different trajectories

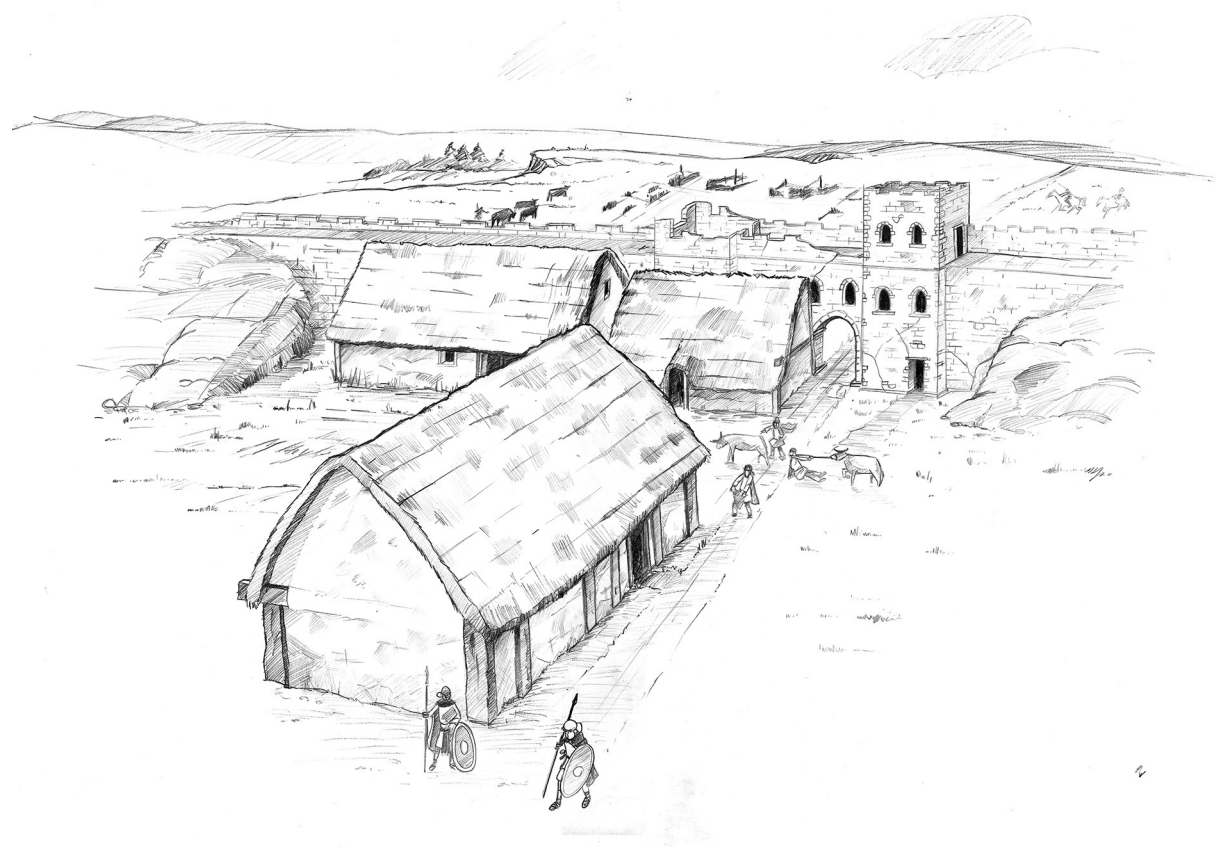


FIG. 2. A reconstruction of the Phase 6b timber hall and associated structures at Birdoswald dating to the fifth or sixth century. (Drawing by Mark Hoyle)

related to the fact that *Britannia* had at least three distinct military commands. The South-East saw a considerable reduction if not outright withdrawal of soldiers of the Saxon Shore command. It seems unlikely that most of the western forts of Wales were occupied past the early fifth century, perhaps having been given over to local militias or barbarian federates. The North arguably continued on past the formal separation of Britain from continental authorities. Rather than speak of a general end to Roman Britain, future research must take a more nuanced approach to the regional variation of the diocese, and accept that there may be many endings, some more dramatic than others.

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