

Episode 3: The Fall of the Western Empire and Britain Alone

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Introduction: Story of Cincinnatus. **(2-3 Minutes)**

In 458 BC, Rome's neighbors to the east broke their one year old peace treaty. The Roman consuls for the year led out their armies, and one army was quickly surrounded and besieged with five horsemen escaping to tell the Roman Senate what had happened. The second consul's army was unable to help, putting the senators into a panic and authorizing the nomination of a dictator. Cincinnatus was granted this appointment for a term of six months.

As the story goes, a group of senators was sent to Cincinnatus to inform him of his appointment, and found him plowing his farm. He asked them, "Is everything all right?" and they asked him to don his senatorial toga before hearing the Senate's mandate. Once he was properly dressed, the delegation hailed him as a dictator and brought him to Rome.

The next morning, Cincinnatus went to the Forum, proceeded to raise a new army, and then marched to battle. The enemy was under attack with Cincinnatus having the upper hand. He accepted their pleas for mercy and offered an amnesty provided that three principal offenders were executed and the rest bowing and admitting their defeat. Cincinnatus then disbanded his army and returned to his farm, abandoning his control a mere fifteen days after it had been granted to him.

The legend of Cincinnatus has inspired admiration through the centuries, and has been invoked to honor other political leaders, notably George Washington. We will get to this in a few seasons... Washington's relinquishing of control of the Continental Army, refusal to consider becoming a monarch, and his voluntary retirement after two terms as president all echo the story of Cincinnatus. Two centuries later, whistleblower Edward Snowden used the nickname "Cincinnatus" when first contacting journalist Glenn Greenwald.

Dates: 180-425

The Fall of the Western Empire and Britain Alone

Why is this important?

- The Roman Empire was the dominant influence on life in the regions that we will focus on for centuries. It's legacy is vast--both the era of the republic and the empire have endured throughout history. We will see that some policy choices made by the Empire and its eventual collapse have massive impacts on how Europe, including Britain, move forward over the next centuries

1. Weakening of the empire in Crisis of the Third Century (**Keep this crisp, 3-5 minutes**)

- Describing the height of trade and commerce under “Pax Romana”, historian Henry St. Lawrence Beaufort Moss:
 - “Along these roads passed an ever-increasing traffic, not only of troops and officials but of traders, merchandise and even tourists. An interchange of goods between the various provinces rapidly developed, which soon reached a scale unprecedented in the previous history and not repeated until a few centuries ago. Metals mined in the uplands of Western Europe, hides, fleeces, and livestock from the pastoral districts of Britain, Spain, and the shores of the Black Sea, wine and oil from Provence and Aquitaine, timber, pitch and wax from South Russia and northern Anatolia, dried fruits from Syria, marble from the Aegean coasts, and – most important of all – grain from the wheat-growing districts of North Africa, Egypt, and the Danube Valley for the needs of the great cities; all these commodities, under the influence of a highly organized system of transport and marketing, moved freely from one corner of the Empire to the other”
- We start with Commodus, the son of Marcus Aurelius, who rejects the stoicism of his father, wishes he was Hercules, becomes a Gladiator Emperor (as depicted by Joaquin Phoenix in the movie *The Gladiator*, and ruins the “Five Good Emperors”. He is assassinated. We won't cover the details but the next year (193) is called the “Year of the Five Emperors” because, you know, 5.
- The Severan Dynasty emerges with some notion of stability but increasing conflicts with the Germanic tribes leads to the assassination of Severus Alexander in 235--we are now squarely in the “Crisis of the Third Century”
- Why?
 - Succession & Civil War:
 - no clear rules for the imperial succession, largely because the empire maintained the facade of a republic;

- becoming an emperor relied on a combination of proclamation by the Senate, popular approval, and acceptance by the army, in particular the Praetorian Guard;
 - After the overthrow of the Severan dynasty, for the rest of the 3rd century, Rome was ruled by a series of generals, coming into power through frequent civil wars which devastated the empire
 - Beginning with Maximinus Thrax, there were approximately fourteen barracks emperors in 33 years, producing an average reign of a little over two years apiece. The resulting instability in the imperial office and the near constant state of civil war and insurrection threatened to destroy the Roman Empire from within and left it vulnerable to attack from external adversaries
 - Natural Disasters -
 - plagues and weather patterns causing disruption in the empire and with surrounding peoples which then placed pressures on the borders
 - Foreign Invasions -
 - Tribes on the other side of the Rhine and Danube increase their threats on the Empire
 - In the east, the Sassanid Empire grows and threatens constantly
 - Usurpers and the “Barracks Emperors” rising up to emperor by the military with little to no involvement by the Senate
 - Trade completely breaks down due to conflict, plague, etc.
2. Aurelian, Diocletian (6-8 minutes)
- Aurelian (270-275)
 - During his reign, he defeated the Alamanni after a devastating war. He also defeated the Goths, Vandals, Juthungi, Sarmatians, and Carpi. Aurelian restored the Empire's eastern provinces after his conquest of the Palmyrene Empire in 273. The following year he conquered the Gallic Empire in the west, reuniting the Empire in its entirety
 - As an administrator, he had been strict and had handed out severe punishments to corrupt officials or soldiers, A secretary of his told a lie on a minor issue, then forged a document listing the names of high officials marked by the emperor for execution and showed it to collaborators. The Praetorian Guard, fearing punishment from the emperor, murdered him in September 275

- Then comes Diocletian in 284 (6 more emperors in between) - initially it does not seem any different; he pacifies and initiates reforms
 - Shares power -
 - Maximian made co-emperor as “Caesar” in 285 and “Augustus” in 286 (fully sealed in 290);
 - Tetrarchy formed in 293 with Galerius as Caesar and junior emperor to Diocletian and Constantius junior to Maximian
 - View of the emperors -
 - The relationship between Diocletian and Maximian was quickly couched in religious terms; Diocletian, in Jupiter’s style, would take on the dominating roles of planning and commanding; Maximian, in Herculian mode, would act as Jupiter's heroic subordinate--For all their religious connotations, the emperors were not "gods", they were seen as the gods' representatives, effecting their will on earth
 - A new style of ceremony was developed, emphasizing the distinction of the emperor from all other persons. The quasi-republican ideals of Augustus's primus inter pares were abandoned for all but the tetrarchs themselves. Diocletian took to wearing a gold crown and jewels
 - every appearance was stage-managed
 - Administrative -
 - He destroyed the Augustan illusion of imperial government as a cooperative affair amongst the emperor, army, and senate.
 - Diocletian implemented a large increase in the number of bureaucrats at the government's command; estimated that under Diocletian the number of men in the civil service doubled from 15,000 to 30,000
 - doubled the number of provinces from fifty to almost one hundred.[224] The provinces were grouped into twelve dioceses, each governed by an appointed official called a vicarius; shifted the governors' main function to that of the presiding official in the lower courts:[229] whereas in the early Empire military and judicial functions were the function of the governor, and procurators had supervised taxation, under the new system vicarii and governors were responsible for justice and taxation, and a new class of duces ("dukes"), acting independently of the civil service, had military command
 - Economic -

- Diocletian restored the three-metal coinage and issued better quality pieces; the nominal values of these new issues were lower than their intrinsic worth as metals, the state was minting these coins at a loss. This practice could be sustained only by requisitioning precious metals from private citizens in exchange for state-minted coin of a far lower value than the price of the precious metals requisitioned
 - system was in trouble, strained by a new bout of inflation. Diocletian therefore issued his Edict on Coinage devaluing the currency through debt policy. his edict risked giving further momentum to inflationary trends. The government's response was to issue a price freeze. The edict lists in detail over one thousand goods and accompanying retail prices not to be exceeded. Penalties are laid out for various pricing transgressions
 - Professional mobility -
 - Diocletian restricted social and professional mobility. Peasants became tied to the land in a way that presaged later systems of land tenure and workers such as bakers, armourers, public entertainers and workers in the mint had their occupations made hereditary.[295] Soldiers' children were also forcibly enrolled, something that followed spontaneous tendencies among the rank-and-file, but also expressed increasing difficulties in recruitment
 - Diocletian falls ill, retires and Maximian retires with him--they orchestrate this to occur at the same time on May 1, 305, with Diocletian in Nicomedia (modern day Turkey) and Milan (nearly 1300 miles apart); these are the first two emperors of Rome to willingly abdicate
 - Constantius and Galerius are promoted to Augustus
 - Maximian's son, Maxentius, and Constantius's son, Constantine, are well qualified and expected to be named Caesars; but, Galerius persuaded Diocletian to have his friend Severus appointed under Constantius over his own son-in-law Maxentius... in the east, Galerius has his nephew Maximinus Daza promoted to Caesar under him
3. Constantine (5-7 Minutes)
- Now, we turn to Britain
 - The island was not immune to the chaos of the last century; in fact, it had never really recovered from the initial invasions as there was almost always tension between the natives and Romans

- Severus split the island into two provinces in about 197 which helped by having power split between two governors; Crisis of the Third Century did have an impact on Britain--it was part of the breakaway Gallic Empire from 259-274
 - Usurper Carausius revolted and declared himself emperor of Britain and northern Gaul in 286; Gaul retaken by Constantius (yes, that Constantius) in 293, Carausius assassinated as a result by Allectus who continued until his death in 296 when Constantius was able to fully get Britain back in Roman control
 - Things continued to be tenuous and Constantius returns to Britain in 305 (this time with his son, Constantine who has left the east and Galerius); Constantius dies in 306 and the military names Constantine to be Augustus
 - Under pressure, Galerius acknowledges Constantine as a “Caesar”--this all sets off a series of civil wars that last from 306 until 324 where Constantine emerges as the sole emperor
 - Constantine is also famous for the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312 where, according to the sources, he saw a vision which inspired him to adopt the sign of “Chi Rho”, the first two letters in Greek of the name of Christ, where he defeated Maxentius
 - This was followed by the Edict of Milan in 313 which reversed Christian persecutions and elevated the religion to equal status; while Constantine himself was the first emperor to adopt Christianity, it would not be until 380 under the Edict of Thessalonica by emperors Theodosius I (East), Gratian (West), and Valentinian II (only 9 years old and junior partner to Gratian)
 - There’s a whole lot more to this story and the final collapse of the West which involves many Germanic tribes and other so-called “barbarians”, especially Attila the Hun, but we will pick that storyline up in two episodes
4. Departure from Britain and Western Collapse **(4-5 Minutes)**
- Even at the time of Constantine, it had been unstable on the island with Rome struggling to maintain power; Constantine created an example from which a military usurper could claim power in the empire
 - In the spirit of Constantine and other usurpers, Magnus Maximus rises to power in 383 from Britain, moves into Gaul, consolidates power, kills Gratian gaining much of the western empire, but meets his death by Theodosius in 388 which effectively consolidates the east and west back under Theodosius
 - Eugenius follows as another western usurper, was again defeated, but this time Theodosius dies just a year later in 395 leaving 10 year-old Honorius as the new emperor in the West; the general Stilicho is the de facto power

- Threats from various enemies lead Stilicho to completely withdraw the Roman presence from Britain
- A few years later, in 406, another series of British usurpers started, ending with Constantine III (no relation to Constantine the Great) who gained significant control of the western empire under the young Honorius
- With little to no military support from Rome and invaders descending on what was Roman controlled Britain, Honorius issues an edict to officially state that Britannia is on its own for its defense around 410
- Rome would be sacked by the Visigoths in the same year and would stumble its way to a final collapse in 476

In two episodes, we will review more of the details of the fall of the Western Empire and the transition of power throughout the region of the continent. But first, in the next episode, we will continue to look at the island of Britain and its fate over the following centuries.

Reading List

Podcasts

- The British History Podcast - <https://www.thebritishhistorypodcast.com/>
- Dan Carlin's Hardcore History 60 – The Celtic Holocaust - <https://www.dancarlin.com/product/hardcore-history-60-the-celtic-holocaust/>
- The History of England - <https://thehistoryofengland.co.uk/>
- The Ancients Podcast - <https://play.acast.com/s/the-ancients/> (Especially the episodes on Boudica and Cicero)
- The History of Rome - <https://thehistoryofrome.typepad.com/>

Video

- Dan Jones - Walking Britain's Roman Roads - https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqtCQJ4CrFxc53D37f_hyIGx7rNsdCpgs
- ROME - the Complete Series on HBO

Books

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S R F Price, and Peter Thonemann. 2011. **The Birth of Classical Europe : A History from Troy to Augustine**. London: Penguin Books. - <https://amzn.to/3tP1rDe>