

# GERMANIC PIRACY IN ROMAN BRITAIN

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“Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm.”  
- Publilius Syrus

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## INTRODUCTION

### Background

This thesis focuses on Germanic piracy in Roman Britain, concentrating on the period of Roman occupation of Britain between AD 43 and the early fifth century. Many scholars have observed that the vast amount of work done on Roman Britain is disproportional to the relative lack of evidence from the period. Scholarly interpretation of Germanic seafaring differs considerably, and there has been much disagreement on the size and scale of Germanic piracy in Roman Britain. Firstly, the amount of concrete evidence is limited by the few and often inconclusive textual references to Romano-German relations. Apart from Tacitus' *Agricola* and *Germania*, historical texts relate only incidentally to Roman-Britain and Germania, and even less has been written of seafaring in the North Sea. In addition, the textual evidence is confined largely to a Roman perspective, due to the lack of a Germanic written language at the time.<sup>1</sup> Even within the historical texts we find that Roman historians such as Tacitus and Ammianus Marcellinus pay significantly more attention to continental inland tribes such as the Marcomanni and Cherusci than active mariners such as the Cannindefates, Usipi or Chauci. Secondly, archaeology has revealed few completely unambiguous results, and there are occasions when historical texts and archaeological evidence conflict. Indeed, thorough archaeological excavations have yet to be made at several of the Saxon Shore forts, rendering our understanding of a central element of Roman Britain's history incomplete. Moreover, there is arguably a tendency among some scholars to overemphasize certain facets of the evidence that is available, for example by relying too much on either text-based or archaeological evidence alone. This is particularly clear in cases where the fields provide contradictory information.

### Aim

The intention behind this study is to examine the size and scale of Germanic attacks and how well the chronology of piratical raids in Roman Britain can be established. Some scholars indicate that there is little, if any, doubt that Germanic piracy was extensive, but

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<sup>1</sup> Some Greek and Byzantine sources also refer to Germanic tribes.

others hold a more reserved stance, arguing that the evidence can not support claims of any large scale barbarian attacks from across the English Channel or the North Sea. Others argue that the chain of coastal installations known as the ‘Saxon Shore<sup>2</sup> forts’ were not a defence against pirates, but that the name merely indicates the settlement of Saxons in East Britain. It has been argued on the grounds of excavated pottery, weaponry and burial sites that Germanic people of North-Germany and Denmark migrated to Britain earlier than implied by Gildas, which is some time shortly after the end of the Roman rule in the early fifth century.<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt that both piracy and eventual settlement took place, but the chronology and scale of the events remain highly debatable. This thesis does not, however, intend to discuss Germanic settlement in Britain, nor the development of Romano-British economy, outside of their relation to possible piracy.

### **Disposition of arguments**

The disposition of this thesis follows a set of fundamental questions. Firstly, at which point can we be certain that Germans were socially, militarily and technologically capable of conducting raids on Britain? Furthermore, what evidence is there that Germans recognised and acted upon the capacity for piracy? Secondly, when did portable wealth accumulate in Romano-British settlements? Thirdly, could the possible actions of Germans in any way be thwarted by Roman countermeasures? If so, what is the evidence of such measures?

Chapter 1 pertains to what is known of the Germanic tribes, specifically how changes in their culture allowed them to develop more efficient tactics of war on both land and sea. These social and technological developments, which seem to have gained momentum in the first two centuries A.D., are important in relation to Germanic capacity to attack and settle in Britain. Although information on the Germanic tribes that had access to the North Sea, either directly or via major rivers such as the Rhine, is relatively sparse, some knowledge can be drawn from various archaeological finds and historical accounts. It is only by establishing how well the Germans could operate in maritime environments that we can ascertain whether they could have been a real threat to the

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<sup>2</sup> The name derives from the Roman document *Notitia Dignitatum*.

<sup>3</sup> Gildas, *Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, II:23

shores of Roman Britain. The proficiency of Germanic seafarers, however, is just one term in the equation that may safely enable scholars to conclude that Germanic piracy was indeed a significant danger to Roman Britain. The economic and military development Roman Britain clearly also affected the chances of piracy and even the settlement of Germanic people there.

Chapter 2 encompasses a variety of subtopics regarding the developments in Roman Britain. The chapter includes discussion of the evidence for early Germanic piracy in Britain, and handles the proof of Germanic settlement on the ‘Saxon Shore’. It is important to note, however, that the two alternatives are only dichotomous as far as the disposition of this text, there is no reason to believe that Germanic people could not both raid and settle. An examination of the Saxon Shore fortifications, the role of the *Classis Britannica*, the economic development in Roman Britain, and various key events in Romano-British history – such as the Antonine Fires and the Barbarian Conspiracy – will be at the center of this thesis. To keep the thesis to manageable proportions I will, however, refrain from reiterating and elaborating on detailed circumstances of historical events unless it is particularly relevant.

### **Definitions and clarifications of terms**

\* *Tribal names:* Throughout the paper I employ the umbrella term ‘Germanic’ for the peoples of Northern Germany and Denmark,<sup>4</sup> which historically included tribes such as, but were not limited to, the Frisians, Chauci, Angles and Saxons. This is due to the overall difficulty of accurately discerning what tribes were actually involved in particular events. It is unlikely that the Roman historians from which we have learned these tribal names were at all times capable of, or even necessarily interested in, applying the correct tribal name when referring to any given historical situation. Malcolm Todd remarks that “It is highly likely that the name ‘Saxon’ was applied by terrified provincials to any group of warriors who appeared from the northern seas. There will have been little inducement to make enquiries about their precise tribal affiliation.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the fluid and transitional nature of Germanic tribal structure caused tribes to merge or split at various times, either through alliances or hostilities. In certain situations it is also

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<sup>4</sup> See Figure 1, p71 (Map of North Sea Germans) and Figure 2, p72 (Map of Germania)

<sup>5</sup> Todd 1992: 217

practical to discern between Germanic tribes as a whole and those tribes that had access to the North Sea, either through direct access to the shore or via rivers. These tribes, which would include Frisians, Batavi, Chamavi, Chauci, Angles and Saxons, will be referred to as ‘North Sea Germans’. However, where a tribe is referred to specifically by historical accounts, and it is beyond reasonable doubt that the account is accurate, that name will be used to avoid confusion.

\* *Piracy*: A fundamental essence of many of the subsequent questions that arise in this thesis is whether the conditions of piracy could have been met during the Roman rule of Britain. These conditions should be kept in mind when contemplating the facts and arguments of the thesis. It is not to say, however, that if any or all of these conditions are present, that there was necessarily piracy, but merely the opportunity for piracy. The encyclopedia *The Companion to British History* defines the conditions of piracy as follows:

*The temptation to piracy is always present in waters which are 1) unpatrolled and 2) used by a rich commerce. If these two conditions are alone present piracy will be sporadic and for personal consumption (like shop-lifting) The opportunity for a pirate industry to establish itself arises when, in addition, the adjacent ports (3) are inadequately policed and their populations can (4) build and (5) man suitable ships and (6) organise an efficient market for the plunder.<sup>6</sup>*

The definition emphasizes an important point, namely the difference between piracy for personal consumption, and piracy with the objective of supplying larger populations in more organized markets. Even so, to make proper use of the definition, it is necessary to realise the nuances of the conditions. The term *adjacent ports* refers to ports close enough to the base of the potential pirates to strike. In this thesis it is most interesting to look at the opportunity for a pirate industry to establish, rather than just sporadic attacks. In that respect points 3 to 6 are all necessary conditions, the potential pirates must have a market, the ability to build and man suitable ships as well as have access to inadequately policed ports within striking distance. Points 1 and 2, however, are sufficient conditions, the waters may be patrolled to some degree and still not deter the *temptation to piracy* completely. The level of wealth of the traffic need not necessarily be ‘rich’, but sufficient

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<sup>6</sup> Arnold-Baker (1996: 1008)

enough to create a worthwhile profit for the potential pirates. Of course, the richer the commerce, the more tempted potential pirates will be. It is worth noting that piracy is not dependent on large warbands or large fleets, but may also be conducted by relatively small groups using speed and surprise to maximum advantage. Thus Germanic piracy could be in form of frequent attacks by a few ships as well as larger fleets, depending on their ability to assemble raiding parties and the quality of the Roman defences.

\* *Saxon Shore forts*: The use of the word 'forts' to describe the coastal installations known from the *Notitia Dignitatum* presupposes they were military structures, which has not been conclusively proven. Only for the sake of simplicity will they be referred to as 'forts' throughout this text.



## CHAPTER I, GERMANIC SOCIETY

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There is little doubt that Germanic tribes on the North Sea coast were a considerable problem for the Romans during the last decades of Roman control in Britain, but in order to examine the possibility and evidence for raiding at earlier stages of Roman Britain it is necessary to study the workings of Germanic society. Their capacity to organise raiding parties, their ability to circumvent or defeat Roman defenses, and their maritime expertise are all issues that require attention.

### **Social and military development in Germanic society**

E.A. Thompson traces a significant development in Germanic society by examining and comparing the differences between the accounts of the Germans by Julius Caesar (*Memoirs of the Gallic War*, published in 51 B.C.) and Tacitus (*Germania*, published ca. A.D. 98).<sup>7</sup> Caesar describes a society which was fragmented into family units, with no permanent centralised peacetime command. Only when the circumstances required it, such as war or another type of crisis, did Germans form assemblies to make decisions that transcended family units or clans. Wartime chiefs and the warbands which they controlled were largely *ad hoc* and would be dissolved upon the end of a conflict or raid. In addition, there would normally be a number of chiefs who represented the individual clans that made up the temporarily assembled warband, and the decision-making power was thus divided. Then, the Germanic tribes would likely be too fragmented to have formed large armies outside of major wars that united the people of a tribe through a clear common threat. Although Germanic raids into Gaul were relatively common<sup>8</sup> it seems hard to believe that the temporarily assembled raiding parties could have been persuaded to pass over targets more proximal to their homeland, such as Gallic settlements across the Rhine, or within the realms of Germania itself, in favour of longer endeavours to Britain. This social structure, however, would undergo major changes during the period from Caesar's publication to the publication of Tacitus' *Germania*. An important change among the developments emphasized by Thompson is that Germanic society went from being a community that largely shared the spoils of the land equally, to a society in which the "leading men of the *pagus* each took a larger or a more fertile allotment than a rank-

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<sup>7</sup> Thompson 1968

<sup>8</sup> See King 1990. Note also that Roman labels of ethnicity, such as 'Germanoi' or 'Keltoi', are not very reliable.

and-file warrior”.<sup>9</sup> The privatisation of wealth, Thompson argues, came about due to the increased contact with Roman culture following Caesar’s occupation of Gaul. The introduction of more luxury articles provided by Roman traders allowed private trade to gain ground over trade that catered for a community as a whole – such as articles needed to produce and conserve food.<sup>10</sup> As individual wealth accumulated, so did individual power. In Tacitus’ *Germania*, it appears that Germanic leaders would now also retain their power during peacetime. Unlike Caesar, Tacitus remarks on the presence of a peacetime retinue kept by leaders, writing that: “This is their principal state, this their chief force, to be at all times surrounded with a huge band of chosen young men, for ornament and glory in peace, for security and defence in war”.<sup>11</sup> The mere exposure to Roman contact and trade may have been one of the major reasons that Germanic society developed more effective command structures and hence became more able to conduct concerted raids into enemy territory.

This re-structuring of Germanic society necessitated an increasingly aggressive policy of raiding in order for the leaders to keep their retinues well-armed, supplied and content.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, a wealthy warlord would now “attract young noblemen from neighbouring peoples” if their own tribe or warlord remained peaceful (and thus left the warriors idle) for extended periods of time.<sup>13</sup> These groups of more permanently assembled warriors would also make longer expeditions and raids easier to conduct should there have been attractive plunder outside of their adjacent territories. It is clear that the increased power enjoyed by the leaders would enable them to strike at targets that could have been dismissed at earlier times for being too distant, dangerous or impractical. It must be remembered, however, that most of the information drawn upon by Thompson is based on Tacitus’ (who himself is merely a secondary source) observations of the more prominent inland tribes of Germania.

With the changes in social structure there followed also a development of military character among the Germanic peoples. As was the case with the centralisation of power, however, it is hard to discern at what times the individual tribes were at what stage of the

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<sup>9</sup> Thompson 1968: 18

<sup>10</sup> Thompson 1968: 18-20

<sup>11</sup> Tacitus *Germania*, Part I

<sup>12</sup> Thompson 1968: 52

<sup>13</sup> Thompson 1968: 58

progression toward becoming more militarily structured. Whatever changes in Germanic military tactics and social structure that had taken place by Tacitus' time, during the first century, need not yet have taken place among the Germanic tribes settled on the North Sea coast at that time. Indeed, it is possible to argue that there was a considerable delay in this social reformation, from the time when the earliest tribes adopted a strong, centralised command, such as the Marcomanni, to the time when the North Sea Germans can be said to have done the same. The Marcomanni, who resided in Central Europe adjacent to the Roman provinces of Vindelicia, Noricum and Pannonia,<sup>14</sup> were by A.D. 17 ruled by the first known Germanic autocrat, Maroboduus. Obviously, the Marcomanni were well aware of Roman culture, and vice versa, and from Velleius' *Roman History* it can be seen that the Romans respected how organised the Marcomanni had become. Velleius writes that Maroboduus' body of guards had through "constant drill (...) been brought almost to the Roman standard of discipline".<sup>15</sup> Thompson remarks that "The peoples who had reached this stage of development, however, attracted the attention of Rome and were clearly exceptional".<sup>16</sup>

On the battlefield, the Germanic tribes were far less advanced than the Romans in terms of tactics and weaponry, although the battle of Teutoburger Wald in A.D. 9 proved that Germans could in favourable conditions overcome large Roman forces. Still, as the social changes reformed the old traditions of independently fighting family units and temporarily formed warbands, the Germans would – at different times – progress toward a more organised battlefield structure such as was the case with the Marcomanni. Thompson points out that this early alteration of the way the Germans organised armies is known to have affected three peoples (the Marcomanni, the Cherusci, and the Chatti), but there is no evidence that other Germanic tribes had taken this step by the first century.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, beneficial as such an organisational development would be for any Germanic tribe, it would not have been a requisite condition for piracy. After all, the North Sea Germans, particularly the Chauci and later the Saxons who did not share a border with the Roman Empire, would not have needed to organise large armies in the

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<sup>14</sup> See Figure 1, p71 (Map of North Sea Germans) and Figure 2, p72 (Map of Germania)

<sup>15</sup> Velleius Paterculus II: 109

<sup>16</sup> Thompson 1968: 65

<sup>17</sup> Thompson 1968: 67 (Although Germanic 'armies' were not nearly as organised or well-equipped as their Roman counterparts.)

same manner as the tribes of interior Germania. Piracy and raiding are rather different from large scale battles. Even if the North Sea Germans did not adopt advanced battlefield tactics as early as the tribes of interior Germania, they would certainly benefit from employing smaller units using hit-and-run tactics. Indeed, the Germans would have trouble beating the Romans in open battle despite their adoption of some Roman tactics. In *Annales*, Tacitus comments that their inferior weaponry and extensive use of long spears were ineffective in dense forests where the Romans could wield their gladius with more ease.<sup>18</sup> In the open, Roman tactics and discipline would regularly overpower the Germans. Only in very favourable conditions could the Germans hope to defeat a Roman army of equal numbers. It is obvious that while the Germans could occasionally challenge a Roman force by a combination of favourable numbers, terrain or morale, they would normally suffer defeat if the Romans could choose the battleground. Thus, the use of raiding parties, hit-and-run tactics, such as pirates would likely employ, would often greatly enhance the Germans' chance of success against Roman forces. It is likely that pirate bands would attempt to avoid confronting Roman defences whenever possible because raiding is motivated by profit and not conquest.

It is quite clear that there were fundamental social developments in Germanic society during the first centuries A.D. While it is difficult to trace these changes within each tribe, and some tribes do not seem to have adopted a strong centralised command even by the end of Roman control in Britain, the increased contact with the Roman Empire following its subjugation of Gaul appears to have spurred a significant change toward privatisation of wealth. That, in turn, allowed coercive and financial power to be concentrated among fewer leaders, who became increasingly influential. So, even though not all tribes would be ruled by a single king (or a select group of leaders), the local leaders surely gained more authority over their men during the first- and second centuries. Nonetheless, the exposure to Rome did not inevitably lead all Germanic tribes to adopt Roman command structure and battlefield tactic, such as keeping battlefield reserves. For example, the history of the Saxons, whose earliest known acts of piracy were recorded in the 280s A.D., show “little sign of any strong centralized power” even

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<sup>18</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, book II, Ch 14

in the third- and fourth century.<sup>19</sup> Because the Marcomanni of the first century were under pressure from Roman armies, they had to organise larger armies to protect their lands. The Chauci and the Saxons, on the other hand, were under no such direct pressure, for they did not even share a common border with Rome. Moreover, their protection from direct assault from Rome created an environment where smaller units of warriors could be more efficient than organising one large force – if their ambitions were to raid and not to conquer land. Even so, it is still relatively clear that most Germanic tribes would in any case progress at least partially toward having fewer, but more powerful, leaders during the first- and second century – as well as having leaders who retained their retinues during peacetime. These developments were strikingly similar to the changes that occurred within Norse society during the tenth century, in which “Stronger and more centralized kingdoms could finance the building of pure warships”.<sup>20</sup> With the ‘conditions of piracy’ in mind, these changes would grant the North Sea Germans greater flexibility and opportunity to act upon a ‘temptation to piracy’ should the conditions have permitted it to be so. These conditions will be discussed further throughout the paper. Despite the evidence that Germanic society developed a greater capacity for raiding, we must remain cautious of concluding that raiding indeed took place because of it.

### **The power of the North Sea Germans in the first- and second century**

A problem with regard to Germanic piracy in early Roman Britain is simply that the tribes that would have been potential pirates are rarely mentioned in any known historical text. Some scholars regard the mere lack of information as a sign that Germanic piracy was not a problem at the time: otherwise they maintain tribes like the Chauci, Frisi, Canninefates or Chamavi would have figured more prominently in the historical accounts. Yet from Tacitus’ *Agricola* there is a chronological gap of more than 250 years to the (incomplete) *Roman History* written by Ammianus Marcellinus, and even though the complete text treated the period of Roman history between 96 A.D and 378 A.D., only fragments remain, describing events from 353 A.D. to 378 A.D. Other texts fill parts of that gap, but none in such detail as displayed by Ammianus and Tacitus.<sup>21</sup> What is

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<sup>19</sup> Todd 1992: 216

<sup>20</sup> Christensen 2002: 135

<sup>21</sup> e.g., Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, Vegetius and Zosimus incidentally refer to Britain and Germania.

known then of the early North Sea Germans? In *Annales*, Tacitus describes a Frisian rebellion dated to 28 A.D. A newly appointed Roman centurion named Olennius began strictly enforcing a tribute of animal hides that had previously been treated rather leniently by Rome. The Frisians, who were hard pressed to produce the quality of hides required by Olennius, found themselves buried in debt to the degree that lands and slaves had to be ceded to Rome. The ensuing revolt stunned Rome, and the surprising Frisian victory brought the Frisians fame across Germania.<sup>22</sup> What we can learn from these passages is that Rome appears at the outset to have been in relative control over both the Frisians and the Canninefates - who were being employed as auxiliaries against the Frisian revolt. Despite the military loss, Tacitus remarks that the Roman forces were “(...) strong enough, had they charged altogether, but coming up, as they did, at intervals, they did not give fresh courage to the repulsed troops and were themselves carried away in the panic of the fugitives”.<sup>23</sup> It is possible that Tacitus ascribes the loss to poor leadership in order to calm worried readers about the prospects of continued Roman dominance at the frontier, but the impoverished Frisians nevertheless defeated technically superior opponents. Tacitus implies that the Senate did not care “whether dishonour fell on the extreme frontiers of the empire”, and writes that domestic problems in Rome occupied and worried them more. In that context, Tacitus’ text, while describing a painful loss, implicitly signals that a change in leadership at the frontier could be a remedy. Tacitus was also, at least by the time of the *Annales*, distinctly critical of what he, and many of his contemporary Roman intellectuals, perceived to be the decay of the leadership and morality of the Roman Empire.<sup>24</sup> It is possible to speculate that his narrative exaggerates the feats of the barbarians in order to bring to attention the problems in Rome. Despite their victory, the Frisians seem weak and would some nineteen years later be displaced from their lands by Rome.<sup>25</sup> It would be surprising if they could have presented any significant threat outside of their borders, especially across the North Sea, during this time. The same applies to the Canninefates, who were located even closer to Roman-dominated Gaul, and were used as Roman auxiliaries against the

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<sup>22</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, book IV: Ch 72-74

<sup>23</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, book IV: Ch 73

<sup>24</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 1971: 2

<sup>25</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, book XI: Ch 19

Frisian revolt. The Canninefates, however, would reappear in a more aggressive role in A.D. 69. When the Canninefates joined auxiliary officer Gaius Julius Civilis' revolt against Rome in that year, they began the process by electing a leader named Brinno. Thompson argues that this move implies that they had "no chief at all in time of peace or that the peacetime chief was not identical with their leader in war".<sup>26</sup> That indicates, according to Thompson, that the custom of electing leaders specifically for a conflict, as Caesar described it, remained even during this time. Again it is obvious that structural changes within Germania were not uniformly adopted across tribes, since the circumstances of the Canninefates were similar to that of the Marcomanni, who became an autocratically ruled tribe at least fifty years prior. Tacitus describes the Canninefates as "courageous", but "inferior in numbers".<sup>27</sup> In *Dark Age Naval Power*, John Haywood claims the Canninefates had a central role in the 69/70 A.D. revolt. Throughout his book, Haywood argues that early Germans were far better seafarers than scholars have previously assumed. His case for the capacity of the first- and second century Germans relies heavily on Tacitus' description of Civilis' revolt, and at times he may be stretching his case too far. Haywood writes: "It seems likely that the Canninefates were the leading naval power among the barbarian allies".<sup>28</sup> Haywood forms his argument on the basis of the Canninefates' early victories in the revolt, when they successfully "assailed by sea the winter quarters of two cohorts".<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Haywood may be overemphasising these victories, as the two cohorts would number about 300-600 men each, a force which would hardly withstand the elements of surprise and isolation while likely being outnumbered by the enemy. Tacitus writes: "The soldiers had not anticipated the assault of the enemy; even had they done so, they had not strength to repulse it."<sup>30</sup> Then again, if the combined forces of the Canninefates and Frisians could summon troops and ships enough to outnumber these cohorts, they might have been able to do so at other times during the first century. In this instance, it seems unlikely that Tacitus was exaggerating the barbarians' valour in order to contrast Roman society, because he explicitly reports the very unflattering actions of the barbarians, who "(...) fell upon the sutlers and Roman

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<sup>26</sup> Thompson 1968: 33

<sup>27</sup> Tacitus, *Historiae*, book IV: 15

<sup>28</sup> Haywood 1991: 10

<sup>29</sup> Tacitus, *Historiae*, book IV: 14

<sup>30</sup> Tacitus *Historiae*, book IV: 15

traders, who were wandering about in every direction, as they would in a time of peace.”<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, everything appears to have favoured the barbarians during the attack, and it would be unduly speculative to estimate their strength from this victory alone. Haywood also remarks that, with the aid of some captured Roman ships, the “Canninefates attacked a Roman fleet off the North Sea coast and won a resounding victory; most of the Roman ships were sunk or captured”.<sup>32</sup> As Haywood himself points out, the Canninefates were likely reinforced by a fleet of twenty-four warships of the *Classis Germanica* captured by the Batavi. Whether the Canninefates would have been able to defeat the Roman fleet without Roman ships is uncertain. In addition, Haywood attributes the burning of the Roman fort at Valkenburg (situated at the mouth of the Old Rhine) to the Chauci raids of 47 A.D., while also referring to (though only in his notes) van Doorselaer who suggests it was destroyed in a joint effort from the Frisians/Canninefates during the 69/70 A.D. revolt.<sup>33</sup> This way, Haywood enhances the impression of both the Chauci and the Canninefates (assisted by the Frisians) as major naval powers during the first century. It may yet have been so, but the fort could hardly have been destroyed<sup>34</sup> by all the tribes (Chauci, or Canninefates and Frisians) when their attacks were some twenty-three years apart. Even though he sometimes seems to overstate the ability of the Germans, Haywood is able to shed light on situations in which the North Sea Germans were clearly able to challenge the Romans at sea, as well as their ability to use the sea- and waterways for surprise attacks. The case for an established pirate industry in the North Sea during this time remains hanging in the balance, however, because there is little to suggest that piracy was a problem during the first century aside from outright conflicts like the A.D. 69/70 rebellion. Indeed, even though the barbarian naval operations of the rebellion suggest that some Germanic tribes were able to raid from the sea, the situation does not describe piracy as it is normally understood – as raiding parties motivated chiefly by the possibility of profit.

If North Sea Germans such as the Frisians were not likely to have presented a significant threat to Roman Britain during the first century, largely for a lack of

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<sup>31</sup> Tacitus, *Historiae*, book IV: 15

<sup>32</sup> Haywood 1991: 11

<sup>33</sup> Haywood 1991: 10

<sup>34</sup> It was actually the cohorts defending the fort that set it on fire, upon seeing that they could not hold it. (Tacitus, *Historiae*, book IV)



resources, and were experiencing pressure on their own lands; and the Canninefates were only partly a threat being occupied by Rome and thus more controlled by Rome; the enigmatic Chauci could have been a bigger problem for Rome, as they were a very powerful tribe. Tacitus describes them and their lands in *Germania*, “A region so vast, the Chaucians do not only possess but fill”.<sup>35</sup> He adds that the Chauci, although quite ready and able for war, were a:

“(…) people of all the Germans the most noble, such as would rather maintain their grandeur by justice than violence. They live in repose, retired from broils abroad, void of avidity to possess more, free from a spirit of domineering over others. They provoke no wars, they ravage no countries, they pursue no plunder”.<sup>36</sup>

This was Tacitus’ impression of the Chauci recorded in ca. 98. A.D., but there are records of Chauci raids into Roman controlled Belgica as early as 41. A.D., after which the Roman victor Gabinius took the name “Chaucius” upon defeating the barbarians.<sup>37</sup> The Roman convention was for a victorious commander to adopt an honorific following the defeat of a serious adversary.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, this tradition may also have been used to promote the standing of a lesser victor. Though it is perhaps not entirely in conflict with his impressions of the Chauci as noble and just, yet ready to fight if necessary, it is interesting that Tacitus writes in *Historiae* that “some auxiliaries from the Chauci” joined Civilis’ in the 69/70 A.D. revolt.<sup>39</sup> Tacitus was thus either unaware of the events of Chauci aggression at the time he described them as peaceful, or the Chauci could have been less willing to exert coercive power during the time between the attacks in 41.A.D. and 69/70 A.D., and the time when Tacitus wrote *Germania* (ca 98.A.D.). Alternatively, Tacitus intended his representation of the Chauci to juxtapose the aggressions of the Empire. We can not assume that the Chauci were completely placid as a people simply because the social structure hardly allowed an absolute ruler to emerge. Still, Tacitus’ portrayal of the Chauci in 98.A.D. signals quite strongly that they were not at that time a threat to Rome. Later in the second century, the Chauci reappear as a pirate threat to

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<sup>35</sup> Tacitus, *Germania* Part II

<sup>36</sup> Tacitus, *Germania*, Part II

<sup>37</sup> Haywood 1991: 10

<sup>38</sup> For example: Africanus or Germanicus

<sup>39</sup> Tacitus, *Historiae*, book V

Roman Britain, but they would vanish from known textual record after ca 170-175 A.D. Haywood spends much effort on arguing that the Chauci presented problems for Rome during the first centuries A.D., a case that clearly carries some validity.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, his arguments are again stretched, claiming upon the evidence of a few incidents that “Chaucian piracy was probably to remain endemic in the North Sea and Channel until, in the next century, it was replaced by Frankish and Saxon piracy”.<sup>41</sup> While some of the Chauci were undoubtedly involved in piracy during the first two centuries A.D., it is hard to prove that they were a prevalent threat to Roman interests in Britain and Gaul during that time. Cases of aggression in which the Chauci are named are few, although their potential as a tribe would almost certainly have been unparalleled by their Germanic neighbours due to their numbers and accessibility to the North Sea.<sup>42</sup>

Archaeological excavation has uncovered a pattern of destruction, dubbed the ‘Antonine Fires’, of a number of small Trinovantian towns in the period between 170 A.D. and 200 A.D. The phenomenon has commonly been linked to extensive piracy and this interpretation is a centerpiece in Haywood’s argument that Chaucian piracy was firmly established in the North Sea during the second century.<sup>43</sup> Note also that Haywood reflects on the “lack of any other historical context to account for the widespread destruction”, which is clearly an ‘absence of evidence’ fallacy.<sup>44</sup> Malcolm Todd, however, suggests that these destructions were “perhaps indicating an outbreak of civil commotion”.<sup>45</sup> The circumstances in Roman Britain during the last three decades of the second century provide some merit for both explanations. It appears that troubles were accumulating in Britain throughout the reigns of Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus. There is a sharp increase in the number of coin-hoards buried during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, and a number of hoards in East-Anglia, Suffolk and Essex have a *terminus post quem* of Faustina II (died 175 A.D.) or Lucilla (died 182 A.D.), which indicates the presence of a threat spatiotemporally close to the earliest outbreak of the

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<sup>40</sup> Haywood infers from Chaucian involvement in several coastal raids, the favourable geographical position of their homelands, and evidence of centralisation of Chaucian leadership, that they were able to conduct naval raids into Roman controlled territory. The extent of the raiding remains uncertain.

<sup>41</sup> Haywood 1991: 12 “The next century” refers to the third century.

<sup>42</sup> See Figure 1, p71 (Map of North Sea Germans) and Figure 2, p72 (Map of Germania)

<sup>43</sup> Haywood 1991: 12

<sup>44</sup> Haywood 1991: 145

<sup>45</sup> Todd 1981: 160

Antonine Fires.<sup>46</sup> Todd reflects on the increased Roman reliance upon the defences at Hadrian's Wall, following the failure of the Antonine Wall, and the fact that "the attention of the High Command was being focused on the Danube provinces in particular".<sup>47</sup> Roman forces were drawn from Britain to the troubled areas of Germania, thus leaving Britain more exposed to rebellion or enemy attacks. Indeed, Dio Cassius writes that "the greatest struggle was the one with the Britons", though that conflict between ca. A.D. 180-184 was with northern barbarians coming from beyond Hadrian's Wall.<sup>48</sup> The internal struggles in Britain could have tempted both domestic and foreign aggression in the absence of adequate policing by Rome. In addition, the accruing wealth of many Romano-British settlements could have tempted piracy during the second century, as "Almost all the cities which have been adequately studied have produced evidence of a burgeoning of civic and commercial life".<sup>49</sup> In short, there would have been ample reason and opportunity for Germanic pirates to raid Britain during this time, but is there proof they actually did?

Of a total of thirteen Trinovantian sites to show signs of destruction, six<sup>50</sup> suffered extensive fire damage. Whereas sites that suffered minor fires, such as Harlow or Tilty, did not have earthwork defences prior to the attacks, nor had defences added after the attacks; all six sites that sustained major damage were either walled (or in the process of having walls constructed) or have produced late Roman military equipment.<sup>51</sup> P.J. Drury deals with at least five sites within the Trinovantian *civitas* that have been connected to the Antonine Fires - all of which were apparently provided with some form of earthwork defence during ca 160-175 A.D.<sup>52</sup> Drury further points to finds of a "probably military, certainly contemporary, copper alloy mount" at one site and the uncovering of various other objects connected to military activity at other sites.<sup>53</sup> Even though it seems fairly certain that at least some of the towns were at some point during the late second century

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<sup>46</sup> <http://www.forumancientcoins.com/historia/hoards/table1.htm> (Analysis of Coin Hoards from Roman Britain) "Treasure Annual Reports" 1997-2001, and Robertson 2000: xl-xli

<sup>47</sup> Todd 1981: 159

<sup>48</sup> Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, book 73, 8:1-2

<sup>49</sup> Todd 1981: 163

<sup>50</sup> Chelmsford, Braintree, Kelvedon, Billericay, Wickford, Gestingthorpe

<sup>51</sup> Rodwell 1975: 92 'Late' Roman equipment means equipment unassociated with the Roman occupation connected to the conquest of Britain or "the re-garrisoning of territory following the Boudiccan revolt".

<sup>52</sup> Drury 1988: 135

<sup>53</sup> Drury 1988: 135

visited by Roman troops, the evidence is not entirely conclusive. One of the most important artifacts found, the copper alloy mount, could possibly be civilian.<sup>54</sup> During times when no garrison was present, a local militia may have been responsible for manning the earthwork defences. In addition, there is no way to establish causal connection between the arrival of troops at a rebellion or an act of piracy from the currently available evidence. The chronological detail remains uncertain: some settlements may have suffered damage prior to construction on their walls, while others may have suffered damage after their defences were built. The evidence appears equivocal, as neither the construction of walls nor the presence of soldiers would be unique to either piracy or civil commotion.

There was a drastic increase in the construction of walled protection of towns all across Britain after the middle of the second century.<sup>55</sup> The construction of these walls took place over an extended period between A.D. 138-185 at the least, however, and scholarly attempts to establish a common reason for the upsurge of defensive construction have been largely unsuccessful. The re-location of Roman troops to mainland Europe may have necessitated the construction of more permanent defensive structures, but the transferal of troops was conducted in stages and is hard to link directly to the increase in defensive structures. If there was merely one cause it is hard to believe piracy was the motive, because a number of the cities that had walled defences constructed were either too far from a waterway or (presumably) too poor to attract pirates.<sup>56</sup> At present, however, there seems to be reason to believe that there was more than just one cause for all the defensive improvements across second-century Britain, and piracy may have been the cause of Trinovantian towns being given earthwork ramparts. In fact, defensive renovations and improvements were added at some of the sites associated with the Antonine Fires, in a second phase near the turn of the second century, suggesting a more serious threat level here than elsewhere in Britain. It appears the threat was transient, however, because the earthwork defences of Chelmsford was abandoned in

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<sup>54</sup> Wickenden 1988: 95

<sup>55</sup> Burnham & Wachter 1990: 13

<sup>56</sup> Todd suggests sites like Mancetter and *Margidunum* were unlikely to have had much worth wealth worth defending.

the early third century, and work on the defences in Wickford was discontinued late in the second century.<sup>57</sup>

The severity of the attacks is evident, although observed only at Wickford and Colchester in Essex, through the discovery of unburied human skeletal remains, some of which have been gnawed upon by wild animals – which suggests no one dared, or lived, to bury the bodies following an attack in which parts of the towns were destroyed by fire.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the pattern of destruction of cities during the final decades of the second century is unique to the Trinovantian *civitas*. It is tempting to argue that the addition of extra defences particular to towns in the coastal regions of Eastern England is reason to believe piracy was looming, but we can still not entirely exclude the chance of a Trinovantian rebellion. Drury points out that the towns connected to the Antonine Fire were not just destroyed, but “subsequently had their walls levelled, rather than maintained and improved, which seems to be peculiar to this region”.<sup>59</sup> Both Drury and others reflect on Clodius Albinus’ efforts to seize power in Rome as a possible reason for the addition of town defences in Britain, particularly along the coastline that could be exposed to piracy.<sup>60</sup> Still, Clodius’ bid for power came in 196 A.D., which means it is basically too late to fit with the timeline for the Antonine Fires, unless defence construction, fires and possibly the arrival of reinforcements were all events of the last four years of the second century, which seems unlikely. Even if the dating of the fires is somewhat imprecise, it is hard to link the fires to Clodius’ actions alone.

Some of the defensive improvements of Romano-British towns during the second century could be connected to whatever caused the rather dramatic surge in coin hoards during later years of Antonius Pius’ reign and the beginning of Marcus Aurelius’ reign.<sup>61</sup> This pattern of coin hoards suits the chronology of the fires better than the events following Clodius’ campaign in Gaul, but without knowledge of the events it can only be the basis of speculation. The total number of coin hoards dated between 156-161A.D. far exceeds the number of hoards dated to the decades prior to and after this period of time.

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<sup>57</sup> Rodwell 1975: 88

<sup>58</sup> Drury 1984: 29

<sup>59</sup> Drury 1988: 135

<sup>60</sup> Drury 1988: 135-136

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.forumancientcoins.com/historia/hoards/table1.htm> (Analysis of Coin Hoards from Roman Britain) "Treasure Annual Reports" 1997-2001

Nonetheless, Rodwell points out that there is no obvious peak in coin hoards in Essex, or indeed elsewhere in Eastern England, that directly correlates with the dating of the Antonine Fires.<sup>62</sup> How does the absence of coin hoards reflect on the explanatory power of piracy or civil unrest as reasons for the Antonine Fires? One would expect the desire to stow away valuables in personal hoards to be present whether pirates or rebels were the threat.<sup>63</sup> It is possible that the absence of coin hoards could simply be because all the valuables were taken. Clearly, there are a variety of ways in which to link the absence of coin hoards to either side of the argument, depending on the severity, speed and forewarning of the pirate raids or rebellion. It is perhaps tempting to argue that piracy would yield a larger number of hoards, because plundering during a rebellion could last longer and be more thorough since local people themselves would be part of it – and those people would likely have more precise knowledge of where to find loot and possibly also have better opportunity to extort from locals the whereabouts of their wealth. Nevertheless, a determined band of pirates could just as well have produced similar results. During a rebellion in which the aggressors were within, there would perhaps be less time to hide valuables. Still, it is unknown whether the damages caused were due to rebels roaming the land or if troubles mainly started from within each settlement. There are innumerable reasons why people would hoard valuables and fear of unrest is just one of them. Further, wealthy members of Trinovantian towns would be sure to recognise the situation once one or two settlements had rebelled, which would obviously have led to an increase in coin hoarding similar to that which would be expected during an extended period of piracy. The overall sample of coin hoards for the second century is indeed quite small, and while the anticipated pattern of coin hoards that would normally be found in the wake of a large scale disturbance such as the Antonine Fires is not present, it may exist though yet undiscovered, or the anticipations could themselves be wrong.

In theory, piracy or rebellion could produce largely overlapping results, which renders it difficult to conclusively eliminate one explanation in favour of another based on the evidence currently available. Considering the general lack of Roman troops,

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<sup>62</sup> Rodwell 1975: 100-101

<sup>63</sup> Although it could indeed be both at certain periods of time.

however, would it be sensible to construct so many walled defences in provinces that would be prone to rebellion? After all, without proper garrisoning, these walls would easily be taken by the rebels and could be used against Roman attempts to pacify the region. Foreign raiders, on the other hand, would not harbour ambitions of using forts, and the local population could make use of walls to hide behind regardless of the presence of any Roman garrison. In this explanation, the emergence of town walls all over Britain is disregarded, as many of the walled towns were not subject to a pirate threat. Towns in northern Britain, however, could have been under threat from territories under little or no Roman control, such as raids coming from beyond Hadrian's Wall. There were walled towns probably outside of danger from raiders, which means it is unlikely that the walls around Britain were all constructed as a result of direct threat from raiders. Still, it is not unreasonable to assume that walls would be better employed against raiders than rebels in times when garrisons were depleted or even non-existent, which seems to have been the case when Clodius' drew troops from Britain to the Continent during the late second century. Traditionally, the Antonine Fires have been interpreted in light of the similar pattern of destruction of roadside villages in Belgica, though most scholars would agree that the similarity does not entail that the cause is the same. Chaucian piracy is seen as the most likely reason for the damages in Belgica.

The Chauci vanish from historical record after ca 170 A.D., which Haywood argues is because they merged with the Saxons. Although alternative theories to the 'disappearance' of the Chauci have been put forth, the archaeological continuity of the people in the region suggests there is little chance the Chauci migrated elsewhere.<sup>64</sup> It seems like North Sea Germans such as the Frisians, Canninefates and Chauci were during the first century only occasionally able to strike against Roman interests and were at other times either incapable or unwilling to do so. Still, it is clear that combined efforts, such as Civilis' revolt, would enable Germanic tribes to cause Rome severe problems. Unfortunately, the evidence for these early conditions is only available through Roman textual records, and can rarely be thoroughly supplemented by archaeological discoveries of this period in time. The records of situations in which the normally quite fragmented Germanic tribes joined their efforts are relatively few, thus we are left with the

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<sup>64</sup> Haywood 1991: 14

impression that the Germans would mostly operate as relatively small hit-and-run groups. The patterns of destruction such as the Antonine Fires or the Belgian Roadside Villages may indicate that piracy became increasingly troublesome during the second century, although for this period of time we must rely almost exclusively on archaeological excavations, contrary to the heavy reliance on text for events of the first century. Even though it is hard to attribute the increase in walled defences in Britain during the second century to a single cause, the addition of a second phase of walls around cities in Eastern England does suggest that piracy, or a local rebellion of non-urban origin, was becoming a significant threat. That leaves an array of questions to be answered: how well were Germanic pirates able to defeat or bypass Roman defences; construct and sail ships adequate for the safe transport of men across to Britain; and was there a sufficient accumulation of wealth in Britain to tempt the Germans to large scale piracy? In addition, the first fort associated with the *Litus Saxonicum* was very likely constructed early in the third century, and its arguably military purpose (cf. p44-45) lends more credibility to the theories that piracy could have threatened Roman Britain as early as the 200s.

### **Naval capacity of North Sea Germans**

In *Britain and the Western Seaways*, E.G. Bowen shows the formerly held axiom among many early archaeologists that: “the seas divided and the land united.”<sup>65</sup> This was a view entrenched by the knowledge that the Roman Empire had been connected by a vast network of roads. Though the idea has been abandoned by scholars, Bowen still finds it necessary to warn against the sweeping generalisations that have been made in the wake of its defeat. He especially criticises the cartographic displays of sea routes extending hundreds or thousands of miles across the oceans. Clearly, anyone with maritime capacity could not necessarily unrestrictedly navigate the open sea, because naval travel would also be limited by elements such as the seaworthiness of the ship, the audacity of the sailors, and restriction of access by others either through patrols, denial of land on which to re-stock supplies (should it be necessary) or various other defensive measures. The major difference of sea-travel opposed to land-travel in the time of the early Germans is that maritime movement allowed for more flexibility, speed, range and surprise – all conditions that are ideal for people already adept at hit-and-run tactics, as illustrated in

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<sup>65</sup> Bowen 1972: 8



many Germanic attacks on the Continent.<sup>66</sup> The sea allowed pirates to pick their landing zones, strike quickly and swiftly vanish afterwards. What tactics could the potential Germanic pirates on the coast of south and east Britain have employed during their raids? N.A.M Rodger claims that:

*“What they seldom if ever did was to fight one another actually at sea. To intercept an enemy in the open sea calls for ships spread far away in a sophisticated scouting system which does not seem to have been attempted until the sixteenth century”.*<sup>67</sup>

Rodger goes on to claim:

*“It would in any case have been futile when no battle could be fought on the open sea. No missile weapons existed in northern waters capable of sinking a ship, nor was it possible to fit rams to the ships of the Northmen. All fighting was hand-to-hand and naval battles could only take place where ships could come alongside one another”.*<sup>68</sup>

These apparent restrictions pose the question: If the capacity to fight on the open sea was so limited, could there be piracy in open waters? Given that finding appropriate targets on the sea would be very difficult, it is clear that piracy was dependent on coastal traffic and settlements adjacent to navigable waterways, which leads to two conclusions: 1) The pirates would be able to scout and spot their targets more easily and 2) the defenders could be protected more easily by shore installations or rapid reaction forces (which several scholars argue was the purpose of the Saxon Shore forts). Germanic knowledge of when and where high-value and low bulk articles were transported would be limited, however, and thus it is much more likely that piracy was concentrated on raiding settlements. Information on wealth concentration in settlements could come from Germanic auxiliaries or traders returning home from Britain (cf. p43).<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Tacitus remarks that the Chatti are remarkable among the Germans for going into a 'campaign' when other tribes go into 'battle', the Chatti seldom "engage in mere raids and casual encounters" as other Germanic tribes do. (Tacitus, *Germania*, book I: 30) Julius Caesar also describes raiding Germans in *Memoirs of the Gallic Wars*, book IV: 16

<sup>67</sup> Rodger 2004: 3

<sup>68</sup> Rodger 2004: 3 (Among "Northmen" Rodger includes Angles and Saxons)

<sup>69</sup> The evidence for military movement between Britain and the Rhineland is extensive. See Hassell 1978: 41-42, and Upex 2008: 89, 92

How would the Romans deal with raiders arriving on the coasts of Roman Britain? Firstly, J.C. Mann comments that “We need not assume that the naval scouting vessels operating off the British coasts, described by Vegetius (IV.37) – hulls, sails and rigging camouflaged sea-green, as also the men’s uniforms – were a new invention of the fourth century. Only such vigilant operations will (sic) have kept down North Sea and Channel piracy before the third century crisis”.<sup>70</sup> Mann seemingly contradicts Rodger, who claims that sophisticated scouting systems were not attempted until much later. It is possible that the Romans conducted their scouting on a more rudimentary level, closer to shore, and still made use of camouflage. Secondly, it is clear that the Romans did patrol the waters around Britain, especially to the south and east, during the first and second century, and the *Classis Britannica*<sup>71</sup> was arguably their principal defence against potential piracy during the first two centuries of Roman Britain.<sup>72</sup> Although the history of the *Classis Britannica* is unclear, most scholars accept that the fleet originated from the invasion of Britain ca 43 A.D.<sup>73</sup> The fleet was highly likely occupied with a transport and supply role throughout its existence, but Tacitus also writes that it was used to attack various British settlements.<sup>74</sup> According to Tacitus, the Roman fleet remained unchallenged around Britain for some time after 43 A.D., although he may refer only to the lack of Briton opposition.<sup>75</sup> There is uncertainty attached to the fleet’s exact history though, for example, during Agricola’s governorship a fleet was required for Suetonius Paullinus to cross to the island of ‘Mona’ (Anglesey) to attack the Ordovices in the early 60s A.D. Tacitus says that there was “no fleet” for Paullinus to cross with because “his plans were not matured”,<sup>76</sup> which could be used to question the efficiency of the *Classis*. In the event, Paullinus improvised and crossed without the assistance of a major fleet. The lack of a fleet must be attributed to the *Classis Britannica* being occupied elsewhere with no time to arrive. Whether the presence of the *Classis Britannica* did deter pirate raiders to any degree is still debatable. It is possible to speculate that Tacitus could have created the impression that the *Classis Britannica* and the Romans were unchallenged so

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<sup>70</sup> Mann 1989: 3

<sup>71</sup> The Roman fleet of the province of Britannica

<sup>72</sup> The question of wealth accumulation in Britain during this period is discussed below (cf. p37-40)

<sup>73</sup> Scullard 1979: 37

<sup>74</sup> Cleere 1989: 18, Tacitus, *Agricola*, 29

<sup>75</sup> Tacitus, *Agricola* 10, 30

<sup>76</sup> Tacitus, *Agricola* 18

as not to reflect badly upon his father-in-law, Agricola, who governed Roman Britain. Mann, however, argues that; “It is probably fair to think that piracy did not exist in the Channel or the North Sea during the Principate precisely because the *Classis Britannica* did exist”.<sup>77</sup> One fact supporting Mann is that units from the *Classis Britannica* were deployed to construct various buildings and fortifications – including parts of Hadrian’s Wall, which was completed during the 120s A.D. – indicating that the Roman fleet did not always have to operate at full capacity to suppress any seaborne threat. It is also possible, however, that resources were drawn from the fleet to invest in a long term defence of the Northern provinces from tribes beyond the Wall, temporarily weakening the fleet’s ability to handle a Germanic threat. Later construction of the Saxon Shore forts, if one entertains the notion that their purpose was defensive and military, strongly suggests that the fleet alone was not enough to counter the pirate threat. In fact, the sheer enormity of Mann’s claim, that the *Classis*’ presence meant piracy did not exist throughout the Principate, a period lasting for more than two hundred years, seems unreasonable. Mann’s conclusion hardly holds up in light of the many separate accounts of piracy during both the first and second century, although the fleet could periodically have suppressed piracy. For example, the first known records of naval raids on Roman territory tell of raids by the Chauci on the coast of Belgica.<sup>78</sup> Tacitus may have had the temporary impression that the Romans were unchallenged around Britain, but it does seem as if piracy was, or at least went on to be, a thorn in their side – which is arguably a reason why the Saxon Shore forts were constructed. Mann relates the situation in the North Sea to that of the Roman success in fighting Mediterranean pirates during the reigns of Pompey and Augustus,<sup>79</sup> but the two operational theatres are not directly comparable. For instance, the Romans would have much less control over areas from which North Sea pirates could come, and thus have a much harder time striking back at the source of piracy than they would in the Mediterranean. That is not to say that the *Classis Britannica* was not a deterrent, however, or that it could not have largely suppressed piracy during certain periods.

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<sup>77</sup> Mann 1989: 2, The ‘Principate’ (succeeded by the ‘Dominate’) lasted from 27 B.C. to 284 A.D. In this case, it would apply to Roman-Britain, i.e. 43 A.D. to 284 A.D.

<sup>78</sup> Suetonius, *De vita caesarum (Divus Claudius, XXIV.3)* More descriptions of Chaucian piracy in the North Sea and the Channel in the late second century appear in *Scriptores Historiae Augusta*.

<sup>79</sup> Mann 1989: 3

Even though it is hard to conclude that there was significant piracy during the first two centuries of Roman Britain, the accumulation of circumstantial evidence such as the accounts of the Chauci, the Antonine Fires, the destruction of roadside villages in Belgica, all point to pirate activity, though piracy could have occurred in intervals rather than as a continuous stream of attacks. As Rome faced growing problems during the third and fourth century, the scale of piracy in the North Sea and Channel seems to have grown accordingly. One element that could inhibit the potential severity of piracy was the capacity of Germanic vessels. How early could the North Sea Germans construct and sail vessels that would not just get them across to Britain, but do so with the capacity of bringing back sufficient booty for the raiding to be profitable? The most desirable valuables, such as coins or jewellery, would occupy little space in a ship and thus booty would probably not present a logistical problem. Julius Caesar refers to the Veneti<sup>80</sup>, who in 55-54 B.C. were temporarily able to escape his legions by sailing out of reach of the Roman forces. According to Caesar, the Veneti's flat bottom, leather sail, oak vessels, were well suited for both the open sea and shallow low-tide waters. He also noted that the Venetian ships were superior to Roman vessels save for speed and the fact that the Roman vessels could be driven by oars.<sup>81</sup> Lionel Casson remarks that the Venetian ships appear to have had the same "distinguishing characteristics (as) the craft found at Zwammerdam and elsewhere in Northern Europe".<sup>82</sup> Still, the Zwammerdam barges and dugouts, dated to 150-225 A.D., were river vessels used in calm waters.<sup>83</sup> If Germanic ships were as seaworthy as the ships Caesar describes, however, pirates could clearly have crossed the open North Sea.

Haywood says that it is likely the Chauci possessed naval vessels that could carry a crew of 30 to 40 men as early as the first- and second century.<sup>84</sup> Alternative theories on the naval capabilities of Germanic tribes, the Chauci included, suggest that it was not until the mid-fourth century that they could make ships that carried as many men and

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<sup>80</sup> A Gallic tribe living on the coast of Armorica

<sup>81</sup> Julius Caesar, *Memoirs of the Gallic War*, book III: 13

<sup>82</sup> Casson 1994: 144

<sup>83</sup> de Weerd 1978: 15

<sup>84</sup> Haywood 1991: 17

were as seaworthy as the Nydam oak ship.<sup>85</sup> Haywood adds that the Nydam ship does not even represent the upper size limit of such ships either, as finds in east Jutland have revealed a ship probably in the same size range as the Sutton Hoo ship – which carried some 40 oarsmen. Haywood claims the ships used by Germanic seafarers during the period from the birth of Christ until around 300 A.D. resembled the above-mentioned ships more than they resembled the earlier dug-out canoes of the centuries before the birth of Christ. Haywood uses the records of the Usipi to support the argument of such early barbarian naval activity across the North Sea. The Usipi served as auxiliaries under Agricola on the west coast of Britain when they rebelled and seized three Roman galleys. After sailing round the coast of northern Britain they crossed the North Sea. The Usipi's actions seem to be a testament to their skills at sea, boat handling in particular, but also their ability to navigate the uncharted waters of northern Britain. They might have had the advantage of the well-crafted Roman ships, but such ships surely required a skilled crew to operate them. Arne Emil Christensen provides a noteworthy criticism of Haywood's interpretation of a similar incident in which Frankish rebels seized a Roman fleet and used it to raid places in the Mediterranean.<sup>86</sup> Haywood relates this incident to the under-appreciated maritime skill of the barbarians, but Christensen suggests that the Franks may have pressed Romans into Frankish service, rather than sailing the ships themselves.<sup>87</sup> This explanation could be applied to the case of the Usipi as well. Christensen's emphasis is criticising Haywood's arguments that early Germanic ships were not notably inferior to their 'successors' the Vikings. What is more relevant to the question of early Germanic piracy, however, is how well the Germanic ships could have fared, regardless of their semblance to ships like Sutton Hoo or the Jutland ships. Even if the Germanic ships were not as sophisticated, they may still have been capable of carrying pirates across to Britain.

It is important to distinguish between Germanic boats that were built for and primarily used on rivers such as the Rhine, and vessels constructed to navigate the ocean, of which little is known. Many river barges of the Roman period have been found in the

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<sup>85</sup> Haywood 1991:63 It is important to notice that all but the Nydam ship have been dated considerably later than the period considered by this thesis, the Nydam ship at around 350 A.D., the Sutton Hoo ship at around 600-610 A.D. and the Jutland ship at ca. 600 A.D.

<sup>86</sup> Haywood 1991: 30-32

<sup>87</sup> Christensen 2002: 135

lower Rhine area.<sup>88</sup> These boats were carvel built<sup>89</sup>, which made them very suitable for calm river waters, though their quite rigid structure is normally at a disadvantage in rougher seas. Since archaeology has produced so few clearly ocean-going Germanic vessels for the time before the Nydam ship, it has been hard to bridge the gap between the early Germanic log boats and the rather sophisticated Nydam ship. Still, it has been disputed whether the Nydam ship was ocean-going,<sup>90</sup> and it was clearly not a sailing vessel.<sup>91</sup> While Haywood claims it is “far more realistic to conclude that the first- and second-century raids of the Chauci were carried out in comparable types of plank-built ships than in dug-out canoes” there is no conclusive evidence to support such a statement.<sup>92</sup> The question yet unanswered is to what degree were the Germanic ships from the birth of Christ until 300 A.D similar to the Nydam or Sutton Hoo ships. The level of seaworthiness and number of troops they could carry are essential to determine to what degree they could strike the coasts of Britain. If they were indeed as sophisticated as Haywood argues, there is no reason why Germanic tribes could not have struck across the North Sea from beyond the northern Roman borders on the continent, nor is there much doubt they could have carried enough men to cause problems when they arrived. It is possible to argue that some Germanic tribes must have possessed some knowledge of naval travel in order to populate the British Isles in the first place, even though they may not necessarily have navigated the open sea in order to do so, but possibly rather using the shorter crossing points between the continent and Britain. At this point, it is a case of different degrees of maritime capacity, however, because crossing the North Sea at one time or another is not decisive proof that piracy was possible. Indeed, the sea routes the North Sea Germans may have used in order to reach the coasts of Britain have been much debated as well. Some scholars, like John Cotterill, claim that the maritime capacity of early Germanic seafarers has been exaggerated. He argues, partly on the grounds of research done by Greenhill (1979) and Green (1963), that an open sea crossing of the North Sea would be impossible due to the poor quality of Germanic boats; the lack of proper navigational aids; the immense effort it would take to row across (he suggests an

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<sup>88</sup> Haywood 1991:17

<sup>89</sup> The planks are joined edge to edge, as opposed to clinker built ships which have overlapping planks.

<sup>90</sup> Jones 1996: 76

<sup>91</sup> Christensen 2002: 136

<sup>92</sup> Haywood 1991: 17

11 day journey, included a 24 hour open sea crossing, between Jutland and East Anglia); and the need for rest following the arduous journey.<sup>93</sup> The quality of Germanic boats is largely obscure, yet we can infer from textual records that the craft possessed by at least some North Sea Germans enabled them to raid Gaul via coastal sea lanes.<sup>94</sup> Contrary to what Cotterill claims, there are a variety of non-instrumental navigational techniques German seafarers could have used. The early Germans were by all accounts not unfamiliar with celestial navigation, and contact with Mediterranean cultures would likely further refine these skills. Seán McGrail also describes numerous methods to navigate the open North Sea without relying upon celestial bodies. Wind direction, for example, can be ascertained by the weather accompanying it, and “Swell on the other hand gives more certain indication of direction for longer periods, although less pronounced in summer than winter”.<sup>95</sup> Experience at sea would also enable sailors to predict what was just beyond the horizon by observing “orographic cloud, the flight of seabirds at dawn or dusk, seaweed and jellyfish in the water” among other natural phenomena.<sup>96</sup> That Germanic raids across the North Sea would have required considerable resolve is beyond question, but it does not exclude the possibility of Germanic piracy in Britain. The raiders could have found rest in secluded spots along the coast, as Bidwell suggests.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, Cotterill argues on the basis of Germanic migration patterns from the fifth and sixth centuries that third- and fourth century Germanic pirates also “interrupted their journeys with short stops in the Netherlands”.<sup>98</sup> A problem with this reasoning is that the local people at the stopping points would not likely welcome passing pirates, who would possibly strain local food supply, occupy land, and create unrest by their presence. It can also be erroneously presumed that pirates would for safety always have preferred to navigate their ships just off shore – though Cotterill’s reasoning rests on the Germanic boats’ incapacity of open sea travel. Problematically, the coastline is often a more treacherous alternative than the open sea

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<sup>93</sup> Cotterill 1993: 227-228

<sup>94</sup> The early colonisation of islands in North-Western Europe, such as the Orkneys by 4000 B.C., although by Celts, arguably displays considerable seamanship by the peoples of North West Europe. (McGrail 1998: 275)

<sup>95</sup> McGrail 1998: 281

<sup>96</sup> McGrail 1998: 278

<sup>97</sup> Bidwell 1997: 43

<sup>98</sup> Cotterill 1993: 228

due to the risk of running into a reef or being intercepted by defenders. Further, the implicit trepidation of open sea travel in the North Sea tends to be overstated, perhaps encouraged by examples like the Roman soldiers' refusal to sail "beyond the bounds of the world" before the invasion of Britain in A.D. 43.<sup>99</sup> While the idea of open sea travel in the North Sea could have been viewed as particularly dangerous to some Romans, it does not at all follow that the North Sea Germans would have shared the Roman sentiment. Cotterill's denial of the possibility of Germanic navigation of the open North Sea conflicts with the number of textual accounts of Germanic seafarers striking at the coast of Gaul, which in itself implies that some Germanic tribes could build and man relatively seaworthy ships; and that the early construction of the Saxon Shore fort at Brancaster suggests that Germanic seafarers may have reached the Wash early in the third century (cf. p44-45).

In the absence of archaeological evidence for ocean-going Germanic vessels, scholars have had to rely upon text to reveal insight on Germanic naval capacity. Haywood points out that Tacitus says the Chauci raided in "levibus navigiis" which he translates as 'light' or 'swift' boats.<sup>100</sup> Alternatively, it could mean 'swift navigations', in sense of the present idiom 'lightening raids'.<sup>101</sup> Tacitus' reference to the Chauci comes in connection with Chauci raids along the coastline of Gaul during Claudius' reign (41-54 A.D.), which clearly shows that at least some North Sea Germans had boats capable of carrying sufficient men to strike beyond their borders.<sup>102</sup> Generally, however, Tacitus refers to Germanic boats with the same word he uses to refer to Roman boats: 'luntres',<sup>103</sup> which is a wide term that could include "anything from rowing boats to small sailing ships".<sup>104</sup> Haywood makes a point that Tacitus uses the same word for Roman and German boats, which could imply that they were not entirely different, at least in the sense of capacity and seaworthiness. What type of Roman boat the Germanic vessels resembled is obviously debatable. It is noteworthy that Tacitus did not himself observe

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<sup>99</sup> Todd 1981: 66

<sup>100</sup> Tacitus, *Annales* XI, 18

<sup>101</sup> 'Navigum' is at root 'sailing', but metonymically it can be 'ship'. Translation provided by Professor Michael Benskin, University of Oslo.

<sup>102</sup> 'Sufficient' depends on the circumstances of the attack. A few men would suffice if the target was poorly defended.

<sup>103</sup> Tacitus, *Historiae*, V, 23

<sup>104</sup> Haywood 1991: 15



these ships, but instead relied upon second-hand sources, which could lead to simplifications like the use of the word ‘luntres’ for Germanic as well as Roman vessels. The account of Civilis’ revolt has also provided scholars with some insight into Germanic ships. It allows us to consider the seamanship of the early Germans, though it is reported only incidentally in Roman accounts. Two naval engagements are particularly interesting. First, in the initial clash between Civilis’ rebels and the Roman army, the Batavian auxiliaries in the Roman fleet mutinied. Tacitus explicitly writes that the Batavians on board the Roman vessels were rowers, perhaps indicating that this was their only role on these particular ships. The Batavians managed to thwart operations on board and ran the ships aground on the barbarian shores. They then “killed the pilots and centurions, unless these were willing to join them”.<sup>105</sup> It seems Christensen’s explanation of the Frankish raids in Roman ships or the Usipi’s circumnavigation of Britain in captured Roman vessels could fit in this case as well. Even if barbarian auxiliaries serving on Roman ships were only rowers, they could have acquired at least some understanding of sailing simply by observing the crews who were trained sailors. D.B. Saddington argues that some of the pilots, centurions and the prefect of the fleet were also Batavian, which would indicate the Batavian auxiliaries were in fact competent sailors.<sup>106</sup> Then again, if we assume that some Germans were in fact capable of operating sea-going ships, it does not follow that all of them could do so. In the second battle, the Roman fleet had gathered to oppose Civilis’ at the mouth of the Meuse,<sup>107</sup> and Civilis now had the advantage of having the Roman ships seized during the first skirmish. Tacitus remarks that “this expanse of water” was “not unlike the sea”, which adds to the impression that Germanic sailors were capable of navigating beyond calm river waters. The barbarian fleet consisted of a mixture of Roman ships, among them triremes and Liburnian galleys, and also captured ships which the Batavians had fitted with improvised sails. Haywood argues, quite soundly, that this shows that “to at least one Germanic tribe involved, a sail was an essential part of a seagoing vessel”.<sup>108</sup> Why sails, ‘an essential part’, would have to be improvised could be due to the destruction of the original sails during the capture of

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<sup>105</sup> Tacitus, *Historiae*, IV, 16

<sup>106</sup> Saddington 1990: 226

<sup>107</sup> Tacitus, *Historiae* V, 23 (H. Goelzer suggests, however, that the battle took place near the Lek or the Waal. (Goelzer 1965-8: vol. 2: 310)

<sup>108</sup> Haywood 1991: 20

the vessels. Scholars have tended not to agree, however, whether Germanic ships had strong enough keels to permit a mast and sail before sometime after the seventh century.<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, it would have been quite possible for early Germanic seafarers to use a hog truss, or take down the sail in weather not suitable to their particular ship. For the case of Germanic adaptation of sails, Haywood makes a number of valid points, but again he makes some unreasonable assumptions. For example, he argues that “If a Nydam-type ship could carry a sail in the seventh century, it could carry a sail in the fourth century or even earlier for that matter”.<sup>110</sup> We can not merely assume that Germanic seafarers took advantage of sails merely because they had the opportunity to do so, and Christensen even remarks that “ships like the Nydam ship are not sailing vessels”.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, Haywood also argues that since the Germanic word *segel* was adopted from Celtic prior to the first contact with the Romans, the Germans would also have adopted use of the device itself.<sup>112</sup> This is decidedly, in so far as words may be adopted independently of what they signify, a non sequitur. Word adoption separate from device adoption has occurred on numerous occasions, for example, the British adopted the word *Stuka*<sup>113</sup> during World War II, but never used or manufactured dive bombers themselves. Despite some of the flawed arguments presented by Haywood, he presents a strong case for the use of sails among some of the North Sea Germans due to their exposure to Roman sailing vessels, in particular among the tribes that were involved in Civilis’ revolt. Nevertheless, the use of sails among Germanic seafarers is not a necessary condition in relation to piracy, although they could aid Germanic pirates greatly in terms of range and speed.

Lastly, it is well established that the sea-lanes between Britain and the continent were used frequently by traders, as described by Bowen in *Britain and the Western Seaways*, which discusses for example how Breton-crafted axes were traded to Britain as early as the late Bronze Age.<sup>114</sup> The connection between Brittany and Britain was severed with Caesar’s defeat of the Veneti in 56 B.C., but the trade routes would merely be

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<sup>109</sup> Haywood 1991:20, 150

<sup>110</sup> Haywood 1991: 21

<sup>111</sup> Christensen 2002: 136

<sup>112</sup> Haywood 1991: 19, 150 He asks: “Why would the word be adopted if the device was not?”

<sup>113</sup> A contraction of the German word *Sturzkampfflugzeug*.

<sup>114</sup> Bowen 1972: 54-55

altered, not discontinued.<sup>115</sup> There is also some sparse evidence for trade between Roman Britain and the Rhineland during the second and third centuries.<sup>116</sup> The Britons traded heavily with the Gauls, exporting grain, cattle, hunting dogs, slaves, gold, silver and iron; and imported ivory chains, necklaces, amber and glassware among other things.<sup>117</sup> Whether there was enough concentrated wealth to tempt Germanic piracy in Britain prior to the arrival of the Romans is unknown, taking into account that raiding Gaul would likely be a more attractive target. During the second century, however, it seems clear that Roman-Britain was developing well economically and would become increasingly interesting to Germanic tribes with the naval capacity to exploit the coastline of Eastern Britain.<sup>118</sup> Their interest, of course, could be manifested in trade just as well as piracy. In regard to the particular waters around south and east Britain, one may argue that the *temptation to piracy* was strong due to considerable trade coming through those waters from the second century onwards, and providing the ‘rich commerce’ which could have tempted raiders. Pirates were probably more interested in raiding close to shore or even strike inland, hence the need for coastal defences. Rodger claims:

*“The best answer to seaborne attack was a combination of fixed defences and ships. It was impossible to build or garrison fortresses to cover an entire coastline, but it was possible to fortify places which command the entrances to, and crossings of, rivers in such a way as to hinder a naval force from penetrating inland”<sup>119</sup>*

These are thoughts possibly shared by the Romans in their construction of the Saxon Shore forts, which would secure shores and trade-centres.

### **Summary of Chapter I**

It appears that all the conditions necessary for Germanic piracy to arise was met or in the process of being met during the first- and second century. The Germanic social developments enabled longer raids, and many of the Germanic tribes were already experts at raiding into foreign territory. The increasing concentration of wealth and power

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<sup>115</sup> Todd 1981: 17

<sup>116</sup> Hassall 1978: 42-45

<sup>117</sup> De la Bédoyère 2006: 160 (See also, Greene 1978: 52-59)

<sup>118</sup> Todd 1981: 163

<sup>119</sup> Rodger 2004:4

among Germanic leaders throughout the four centuries considered by this thesis not only allowed more frequent and longer raids, it necessitated raiding to fund the permanently assembled warbands. While the capacity and willingness of some North Sea Germans to conduct raids appears to have varied throughout the first two centuries of Roman Britain, they did occasionally attack. Furthermore, as Roman trade, mining and culture began to spread throughout Britain there was a clear increase in the accumulation of wealth during the second century. Nevertheless, while first century piracy in the North Sea has been attested by historical records, no such texts are available for the second century.

Archaeological evidence from late second century Belgica and Britain reveal destruction patterns that appear to be caused by either piracy, *bagaudae* banditry, or both. Brigands, or a combination of pirates and brigands, could account for much the widespread construction of walled defences in Britain during the second century. Still, it is necessary to consider the developments in Roman Britain more closely— such as the construction and purpose of the Saxon Shore forts.

## **CHAPTER II, THE SAXON SHORE**

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The string of coastal forts on the south and east coast of Britain known as the ‘Saxon Shore forts’ could provide insight into the size and scale of any seaborne threat during the time both before and after they were built. Their size, structure and location could say something about the perceived threat before they were constructed, while evidence of how the Romans used them later could provide an indication of how a pirate threat evolved. If and only if, one can establish what the forts were actually used for, not necessarily designed as, will it be possible to use them as a part of an argument on the size and scale of piracy. Even if the forts were not originally designed for military purposes, it is possible that they were later adapted to meet a threat presented by seaborne attacks. Similarly, if they were constructed for military purposes, they might not have been so used during the entire period, but merely taken on other functions. In that respect, the chronology of occupation is as important as the dating of the original construction. It is also important to examine whether the necessary conditions for piracy in Britain were met. The economic growth of Roman villas and coastal settlements, the accumulation of coin hoards, and the accounts of major events such as the so-called ‘Barbarian Conspiracy’ of 367 A.D. are central to understanding the course of Germanic seaborne raiding in Britain. The third century brought the Roman Empire an array of problems among which it is commonly believed Germanic piracy was significant. However, some scholars hold the view that the threat from Germanic pirates has been exaggerated and that the evidence is too limited to infer the existence of a pirate threat to Britain during the third century. It has been speculated, for reasons considered below (cf. p55), that the Saxon Shore forts were not military, but functioned as trans-shipment centres. It does appear, however, that there is some evidence of Germanic piracy in third and fourth century Roman Britain, particularly during periods when Rome struggled to cope with internal problems as well as external threats.

### **Roman villas and coin hoards in Britain**

A proper study of Germanic piracy in Roman Britain could not be limited to the Saxon Shore forts or Germanic ambition and capacity alone. Piracy is dependent upon the availability of concentrations of low volume and high value goods. It is necessary to examine at what times Britain would have been an interesting option for potential pirates,

which requires at least a rudimentary look at the development of the Romano-British economy. It is important to note that economic growth in Roman Britain could coincide with piracy, because raiders would seek portable plunder such as precious metals, gemstones or jewellery, which were items reserved for the social elite. The mainstay of the economy, however, such as farming and industrial production would rarely be of interest to pirates, though collateral damage to housing and production facilities could temporarily harm production levels. Thus, a thriving economy is not evidence of absence of piracy. Moreover, the lack of destruction patterns other than the Antonine Fires is not conclusive evidence for lack of piracy. As Pearson remarks, “it presupposes that raiding barbarians instinctively destroyed any site that they looted”, which would be an ineffective way of avoiding detection by the Roman defenders.<sup>120</sup>

Roman life, in terms of architecture, agriculture and substantial trade, generally spread quite slowly into rural areas of Britain. The earliest Roman-style farms that have been discovered were all situated near navigable estuaries in ca. 55-80 A.D. in Kent and Sussex.<sup>121</sup> Still, this period has produced few Roman farmsteads, and it appears many regions were not sufficiently policed to safely construct villas until the late first century onward.<sup>122</sup> Todd speculates that the proprietors of the early villas were not only concerned with agriculture, but also had commercial interests. Whether these Roman farms were earning and accumulating enough valuables to warrant the interest of pirates is unknown, although the continued development of farms and villas as well as the mining of metals and minerals in Britain is sure to have provided *temptation to piracy* once valuables were accumulated in trading centres accessible to pirates. In addition, the protection of rural sites must have been quite difficult, even though the *Classis Britannica* would probably have patrolled the British coast during this time during the late first- and early second century (cf. p26-27). The distribution of coin hoards, however, suggests that the inhabitants of East England did not experience much concern until the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180 A.D.) and the Antonine Fires (cf. p18-23). Anne S. Robertson remarks that it is almost indisputable that: “The practice of saving or hoarding

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<sup>120</sup> Pearson 2005: 77

<sup>121</sup> Todd 1981: 129

<sup>122</sup> Todd 1981: 132 (The Iceni territory prior to the suppression of the Boudican revolt is an example of an insufficiently policed region)

continued without interruption throughout the whole span of the Roman occupation in Britain”.<sup>123</sup> It is hence possible to attribute some significance to variations in coin hoard distribution, which would not have been possible if there was no continuous practice of hoarding. Apart from a clear pattern of hoards in East England during the reigns of Claudius (41-54 A.D.) and Nero (54-68 A.D.) there is no marked accumulation of hoards in East England. The East-Anglian hoards of a post-Claudian date are most probably to be connected to domestic instability following the invasion in 43 A.D., while post-Neronian hoards are probably linked to the Iceni revolt. It is improbable that Germanic piracy was the reason for the hoarding in Claudian or Neronian East Anglia. The hoards of the following periods, during the reigns from Vespasian (69-79 A.D.) to Antonius Pius (138-161 A.D.) also appear to support what textual record say of the Roman military campaigns in Britain.<sup>124</sup> Even though coin hoard evidence is by nature inconclusive, it is noteworthy that the number of hoards in East England is very low until the reign of Marcus Aurelius. In the 190s, the Roman Empire experienced a number of *coups d'état*, which Todd argues may have led to considerable wealth going into the *res privata*.<sup>125</sup> In 196 A.D., the usurper Clodius Albinus brought his army to the continent, severely depleting the British garrison.<sup>126</sup> The uncertainty that accompanied the numerous power shifts could have been an opening for piracy, since the Roman defence of Britain suffered from disorganisation, and wealth could have accumulated in less defended private quarters. The raids that could have followed may be the reason why the first Saxon Shore forts were constructed in the early third century. Unfortunately, the lack of Imperial continuity also means that no coin hoards can be linked to this period with any accuracy.

Burnham and Wachter argue that the general pattern of expansion in the small towns of Roman Britain during the second century is contrasted with decline from the “later second century onwards”.<sup>127</sup> This decline, however, largely struck industries like pottery production and salt mining, none of which are susceptible to piracy. Burnham and Wachter also remark that the deterioration of these industries was “largely confined to the

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<sup>123</sup> Robertson 2000: xxv

<sup>124</sup> For example, there are clear patterns of hoards in the north of England from the reigns of Hadrian and Antonius, as well as Welsh hoards linked to the conquest of Western Britain. See Todd 1981: 74-89

<sup>125</sup> Todd 1981: 169

<sup>126</sup> Faulkner 2004: 67

<sup>127</sup> Burnham & Wachter 1990: 14

west Midlands-Cheshire plain area” and must be viewed as an exception to the general development of Roman Britain during the last quarter of the second century. Todd claims assumption of decline in the prosperity of Roman villas during the third century is not supported by sufficient evidence. He argues the difficulty in asserting decline from the lack of improvements of a villa as a major reason, since substantial changes could have been made to the wooden structures of a villa without altering the superstructure. In addition, many villas that show signs of abandonment were re-occupied and show signs of ambitious rebuilding, which Todd argues is due to ownership change rather than decline in prosperity.<sup>128</sup> Archaeologists have been largely unable to use pottery-dating for events in the third century due to the unchanging Romano-British pottery tradition throughout that time. What is clear is that by the end of the second century, Romano-British towns were increasingly well organised and largely prosperous. Roman efforts to construct new walls or improve existing defences around many towns continued during the third century and into the fourth.<sup>129</sup> It does not follow, however, that walls were added exclusively and specifically for protection against an enemy. Constructing walls would also enhance a town’s importance and status, which could in itself be a motivation.

### **Germanic piracy in the third century**

Stephen Johnson argues that by the third century Roman commanders in Britain no longer considered the presence of the *Classis Britannica* enough to suppress piracy around the south and east coasts of Britain. He claims: “During the third (century), the fleet (*Classis Britannica*) evidently ceased to function as effectively as before, for, by its end, Franks and Saxons were in control of the sea-lanes.”<sup>130</sup> It is debatable if, per definition, it would be possible to ‘control’ sea-lanes at all (cf. p24-25), but it appears that the *Classis* could not effectively deter pirates during the third century. Haywood introduces a theory that sheds light on Johnson’s statement; “There seem to be three main causes for the third century upsurge in Germanic piracy on the northern and western coasts of the Roman empire: firstly, changes in the tribal structure of the west Germans; secondly, a political and economic crisis in the Roman empire; thirdly, the start of a

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<sup>128</sup> Todd 1981: 194

<sup>129</sup> Burnham & Wachter 1990: 315

<sup>130</sup> Johnson 1976: 16



marine transgression”.<sup>131</sup> The changes in tribal structure are discussed in the first chapter, while the political and economic problems in the Roman Empire are discussed throughout this chapter. Haywood argues that marine transgression gave more Franks and Saxons easier access to the sea and made it easier to conduct naval operations and gave displaced people a good reason to seek other lands to settle upon.<sup>132</sup> These events, claims Haywood, provided the backdrop for the construction of the Saxon Shore forts and have led scholars to believe the forts were a defence against a growing pirate threat. Of eighty-seven archaeologically attested large roadside villages (*vici*) in Belgica, thirty-one failed to survive the late third century and of the fifty-six that did survive, twenty-two had been fortified by ca. 300 A.D. and had reduced populations.<sup>133</sup> Haywood adds that the rate of failure to survive is far higher in the coastal *civitates*, a pattern which he links to piracy. Although the sample from Belgica is taken from a much longer period than the Antonine Fires, it has been assumed that piracy may at least have been partly the reason for the destruction. Edith Wightman, however, states that there is little conclusive evidence as to what caused the extensive damages.<sup>134</sup> It is worth noting that these kinds of destruction have traditionally also been attributed to *bagaudae*,<sup>135</sup> but this type of banditry has been as difficult to study as piracy. Wightman remarks that the original destructions (some of the *vici* were re-built only to be destroyed again) could easily have meant that “the dislocated and dispossessed provided a fertile recruiting-ground for the leaders of the (...) *bagaudae*”.<sup>136</sup> It is possible that piracy started a snowball-effect that grew into large scale banditry of both internal and external origin. What can be generally discerned from the pattern of destruction in Belgica is that the Roman Empire was losing territories to unrest, which would allow further exploitation of the weakened population by such forces as the *bagaudae* or barbarian raiders. Villages in south and east Britain, however, show no similar patterns of destruction during the third century. In fact, it seems that Roman Britain was experiencing a period of relative growth during this time. Todd argues that the reason why Britons appears to have readily accepted Carausius’ usurpation in 286

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<sup>131</sup> Haywood 1991: 23

<sup>132</sup> Haywood 1991: 30 (More on marine transgression, cf. p65, below)

<sup>133</sup> Haywood 1991: 34

<sup>134</sup> Wightman 1981: 236

<sup>135</sup> Brigands that flourished, chiefly in unprotected rural areas, during the decline of the Roman Empire.

<sup>136</sup> Wightman 1981: 240

A.D. was that the region was “among the most secure and stable in the west”.<sup>137</sup> Of course, it is a leap to conclude that that Carausius’ rather unproblematic usurpation was entirely due to the prosperity of Britain, or indeed that economic growth can be back-tracked through the third century as a whole. Todd himself states that the third century is, in terms of historical accounts of Britain, “a Dark Age more impenetrable than the fifth century”,<sup>138</sup> and scholars are thus building many of their arguments upon an absence of evidence. Several scholars<sup>139</sup> have noted that there is virtually no textual evidence of piratical attacks on Roman Britain, whereas seaborne attacks on the coast of Gaul are relatively well documented. Importantly, the lack of archaeological evidence of destruction in Britain compared to the extensive damages across the Channel does lend some credibility to claims that Britain was indeed spared extensive piracy during at least parts of the third and fourth centuries. That, in turn, brings about what may appear as a dissonance of evidence, because no less than twelve coastal forts connected to the *Litus Saxonicum*<sup>140</sup> were constructed during the third century. Brancaster and Reculver, which have produced evidence of military occupation (cf. p44-45 & p59), have been relatively safely dated to the early third century, while the remaining forts all appear to date from the second half of the third century (further, p49-53). When at least some of the forts were military, and several scholars<sup>141</sup> claim all the forts were garrisoned, why would military installations have been constructed during a period of little or no threat? If the Saxon Shore forts were intended to combat piracy, an analysis of Germanic piracy in third century Britain requires an understanding of the context in which the forts developed.

### **Possible targets of piracy in Britain**

Johnson believes there is some slight evidence for Roman military activity at two forts not associated with the *Litus Saxonicum*, among them an auxiliary fort near Brough-on-Humber. He speculates that there may have been forts now lost in the sea that “linked the

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<sup>137</sup> Todd 1981: 210

<sup>138</sup> Todd 1981: 182

<sup>139</sup> For example Johnson (1976), Haywood (1991) and Pearson (2005)

<sup>140</sup> By 285 A.D. there were at least 13 forts, three of which were on the continent. (Todd 1981: 212/Figure 3, p73)

<sup>141</sup> Johnson (1976) Cunliffe (1977) Maxfield (ed., 1989)

fort at Brancaster more closely with the coastline opposite the Wash”.<sup>142</sup> Johnson also remarks that the Wash was an ideal invasion route due to the presence of the navigable rivers the Nene and the Witham, and Haywood says the Romans believed Germans “capable of mounting a major sea-borne invasion of Britain”.<sup>143</sup> Their statements appear to require moderation, however, because there are no signs that Germans were capable of launching an invasion of Britain during the third century. Moreover, Johnson himself observes on the forts that:

“All the sites lie on comparatively low ground near a harbour, and thus they represent defended ports rather than military positions sited to gain the maximum advantage from an elevated defensive position”.<sup>144</sup>

Therefore, the positions of the forts make little sense if fear of an invasion was the reason they were constructed. Pirates, however, would have little reason to attack the forts themselves (cf. p52-53). It is perhaps more likely that Germanic raiders used the Wash to access attractive targets in the Fenland – which was becoming a wealthy region of Britain: The “Nene valley saw major economic expansion during the Hadrianic period and throughout the second century”.<sup>145</sup> The area has produced a number of stone buildings believed to be the residence of *conductores*,<sup>146</sup> which indicates there would probably have been considerable accumulated wealth in the area. Knowledge of wealthy sites accessible from the Wash could have been provided by returning German auxiliaries that had finished their service with Roman forces in Britain. It is well documented that North Sea Germans like the Usipi, Batavians, Tungrians, and Frisians served as auxiliaries in Britain.<sup>147</sup> Moreover, evidence suggests that some of the kiln masters working at Longthorpe from the A.D. 60s were immigrants from the Rhine area.<sup>148</sup> Clearly, there were both civilian and military links between the Rhineland and the Fenland. It is unclear what fate befell the Fenland during the third century, however, but its agricultural economy seems to have suffered due to natural flooding. The fortified

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<sup>142</sup> Johnson 1976: 20

<sup>143</sup> Haywood 1991: 36

<sup>144</sup> Johnson 1976: 122

<sup>145</sup> Upex 2008: 202

<sup>146</sup> *Conductores* would have been employed to collect taxes, etc.

<sup>147</sup> Hassell 1978: 41-42

<sup>148</sup> Upex 2008: 89

Roman town *Durobrivae*<sup>149</sup> grew to become an important military and industrial centre during the second and third century since it “was well positioned for communication and trade across the whole of Roman Britain”.<sup>150</sup> *Durobrivae*’s hinterland shows clear signs of prosperity during the second century, which continued into the third century.<sup>151</sup> If Brancaster was built to protect the inlets of the Nene and Witham rivers, *Durobrivae* and the surrounding area must have presented an array of interesting targets for potential raiders, so necessitating the strong military presence there.

Although the loss of sites north of Brancaster can not be proved, the fact that Brancaster was one of the earliest forts to be erected presents an interesting case.<sup>152</sup> Of the system that would later form the Saxon Shore command, Brancaster is the northernmost and the farthest away from the strategic chokepoint at Dover (where a fort was later constructed).<sup>153</sup> It is reasonable to assume that the Romans, even during a relatively peaceful time, would construct their forts where a threat would be most difficult to handle. Thus, the fact that Brancaster was constructed at a site relatively far away from the shortest North Sea crossings suggests not only that some pirates had the capacity to strike across the open sea, but that they could do so early in the third century. The Germanic pirates could either have traveled down the coastline of Friesland and Belgica before sailing all the way up the coast of East England, or they could have chosen the relatively safer and quicker route across the open sea (cf. p41-42). The open sea route is between 100 and 160 nautical miles,<sup>154</sup> but the coastal route would at least double that. If Cotterill is correct, and Germanic tribes could not sail across the open sea during the third century, there seems to be no military motive for building Brancaster – since attacks on the Wash would require a substantially longer and more dangerous journey than alternative targets along the east coast of Britain. The discovery of fragments of tiles at Brancaster, however, suggests the *cohors I Aquitanorum* was associated with the fort at some point early in the third century, possibly having contributed to the fort’s

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<sup>149</sup> Near Water Newton, Cambridgeshire (not to be confused with *Durobrivae Cantiacorvm* in Kent).

<sup>150</sup> Cambridgeshire Extensive Urban Survey, 2002: 16 (See Figure 5, p75, Map of Romano-British roads)

<sup>151</sup> Burnham & Wachter 1990: 315

<sup>152</sup> It seems that Brancaster and Reculver (near Herne Bay, Kent) were constructed earlier than the rest of the Saxon Shore forts, probably sometime during the first decades of the third century, but an exact dating of their construction remains debatable.

<sup>153</sup> Figure 3, p73 (Map of Saxon Shore development)

<sup>154</sup> Ca 200km to 300km

construction and garrisoning.<sup>155</sup> Although the fort remains largely unexcavated, it also appears to have had a *praetorium*,<sup>156</sup> which strengthens the argument that the fort was operational in a military sense during the early third century.<sup>157</sup> By the time the *Notitia* was compiled, Brancaster was garrisoned by a unit of *equites Dalmatae*. Thus the fort was at least some time during the late fourth century garrisoned by a highly mobile unit well-suited to combat piracy. While it is possible to speculate that Pictish piracy could have presented a threat to the Wash, Brancaster's location indicates its purpose was to intercept pirates coming from the east, not the north.<sup>158</sup> Without evidence of any auxiliary forts near the north of the Wash, Pictish piracy does not seem to be the reason to protect the Wash during the early third century. Thus, the relatively early construction of Brancaster suggests that Germanic pirates chose the open sea in favour of traveling along the patrolled coasts of Belgica and Britain. Consequently, even as early as the first half of the third century it appears that a pirate threat around the Wash could have been more severe than most other places on the shores of East Britain. The apparently coincident decline of the *Classis Britannica* is an important element of this interpretation. If the *Classis* was still operating efficiently in the Channel, it would make sense to protect the most distant frontier first, since the *Classis* could hardly be expected to intercept pirates at Brancaster if otherwise stationed near the chokepoint at Reculver or Boulogne. Henry Cleere comments that "A funerary inscription from Arles suggests that the fleet itself was still in being in the 240s".<sup>159</sup> Brancaster's construction must nevertheless be seen in light of the impending restructuring of the fleet and its apparent lack of efficiency during the early third century.<sup>160</sup> Later in the third century, the Romans obviously focused on reinforcing the defences around the Thames estuary and the Channel. The presence of a fort at Brancaster, regardless of the efficiency of the *Classis*, suggests that the rivers emptying out in the Wash were targets for Germanic pirates.

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<sup>155</sup> Johnson 1989: 131

<sup>156</sup> Roman officers' quarters.

<sup>157</sup> Edwards & Green 1977: 25

<sup>158</sup> Several watchtowers were, however, constructed along the coastline of North Yorkshire and on the Western coast—probably guarding against raids from Scotland and Ireland respectively (Pearson 2005: 79)

<sup>159</sup> Cleere 1989: 22

<sup>160</sup> The fleet was formally disbanded, but arguably reformed into smaller units. The restructuring has been linked to a revised military strategy connected to the Saxon Shore system. (Cleere 1989: 22)

By the mid-third century Germanic pirates such as the Franks and Saxons were clearly wreaking havoc upon the Channel coast, although seemingly concentrating on the continental side, arguably evidenced by the construction of forts in Belgica, and the invasions of Gaul in ca. 260 A.D. and again in ca. 276 A.D. Johnson writes: “The great invasion of 276 in Gaul brought repercussions also on the Channel coast, for there the threat of invasion was equally severe: the Saxons’ mobility made them an enemy to be feared all along the exposed coastlines”.<sup>161</sup> Attacks into Gaul from beyond the Rhine (and Danube) contributed to the creation of the ‘Gallic Empire’, which broke away from central rule in 260 A.D. Germanic attacks, as well as *bagaudae* banditry prevailed even after restoration of the central Empire in 274 A.D.<sup>162</sup> The West Roman empire was clearly in trouble and Britain was probably no exception. The barbarian raids into Gaul and the Romans’ trouble to contain them points to there being definite reason to increase defences on the coast of Britain. It is in this context that most of the Saxon Shore forts were constructed, most probably between the mid-third century and ca. 285 A.D.<sup>163</sup> There have been numerous efforts to attribute the construction of the coastal installations to a single cause, however, the internal power struggles, many shifts in power and subsequent changes in interest from central Roman authorities render it unlikely that the forts were part of a single, coherent central strategy. It seems more likely that forts were added in several phases, according to the threat perceived by the governors of Britain.

### **Saxon Shore: Interpreted as ‘a shore attacked by Saxons’**

There are conflicting views on the intended and practical use of the Saxon Shore forts and even the reason for the name *Litus Saxonicum*. The term ‘Saxon Shore’, known only from the Roman document *Notitia Dignitatum*, has generally been interpreted to mean one of two things, either “Shore under attack from Saxons” or “Shore on which the Saxons have settled”. A third theory put forth by J.G.F. Hind is that the ‘Germanic Sea’ (North Sea) was known as the ‘Saxon Sea’ during the third century,<sup>164</sup> but the theory is

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<sup>161</sup> Johnson 1976: 22 (Johnson means the British side of the Channel coast in this context.) Some of the abovementioned (cf. p41) Belgian *vici* would almost certainly have succumbed during this time of peril.

<sup>162</sup> Faulkner 2004: 125 (The Gallic Empire also included Britain)

<sup>163</sup> Although Pevensey has been dated to the 290s, Pearson 2005: 82 (For more details on dating, see Cunliffe 1977: 1-3, and Fulford & Tyers 1995: 1009-14)

<sup>164</sup> Hind 1980: 322

not supported by any textual references to a ‘Saxon Sea’.<sup>165</sup> The *Notitia Dignitatum* survives only as a fifteenth-century copy of a document that must have had its origins at the end of the fourth century. It is hard to ascertain how up to date the various parts of it are, and in some respects what forts named in it can be linked to known remains of forts today. Unfortunately, the large gap between its original compilation and the time it was copied leaves room for misinterpretations and copyists’ errors.<sup>166</sup>

That the *Comes Litoris Saxonici per Britanniam* is listed among ‘frontier commanders’ in the *Notitia Dignitatum* is probably the strongest reason for assuming that the name is of military origin. Johnson concludes that “Where there is a frontier, a *limes*, the Romans would have understood there to be a distinct fortified line”.<sup>167</sup> The *Notitia Dignitatum* describes both sides of the Channel as *Litus Saxonicum*.<sup>168</sup> The singular *Litus* as opposed to the plural *Litora* (shores) may seem strange as applying to two distinct shores (the coast of Britain and the coast of Gaul). Johnson explains this as a Roman military distinction, thinking of the shores as one area of command.<sup>169</sup> Johnson’s theory is that:

“The Saxon Shore forts were not merely concerned with the protection of Britain: they formed a Roman frontier, guarding the north-eastern reaches of the empire, including parts of northern Gaul. The defence of these areas and of Britain went hand in hand”.<sup>170</sup>

It is possible that the Saxon Shore forts were not originally a frontier command structure, but were operated in another fashion prior to forming the *Litus Saxonicum*. Given that the forts were constructed in phases during an extended period, it is difficult to ascertain exactly when the Romans deemed it necessary to form the *Litus Saxonicum* as it is known in the *Notitia*. Alternatively, the *Litus Saxonicum* may just be a formalisation of a pre-existing command system. Both Mann and Johnson argue for the interpretation “Shore under attack from Saxons”. Mann claims:

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<sup>165</sup> Cotterill 1993: 231 Despite having discredited the ‘Saxon Sea’-theory for lacking evidence, Cotterill maintains in his conclusion “that the term *litus Saxonicum* may simply be a geographical name”. (Cotterill 1993: 239)

<sup>166</sup> Johnson 1976: 65

<sup>167</sup> Johnson 1976: 71

<sup>168</sup> Two continental forts are “described as being *in Litore Saxonico*” (Johnson 1976: 70)

<sup>169</sup> Johnson 1976: 114

<sup>170</sup> Johnson 1976: 2

“This string of forts, even if it had been built for some other purpose – which hardly seems likely – was clearly employed during the fourth century, and whether efficiently or not, in some defensive fashion, against attack from the sea: such attack can only have come from Saxons, with or without Frankish allies.”<sup>171</sup>

While it is clear from the position of continental Roman borders, which extended as far north as present day Belgium, that potential attacks would most likely have come from Saxons or other Germanic tribes north of the Roman border, Mann does not say much as to why there would be a Saxon threat, but as discussed (cf. p42-46) a potential target in the early third century could have been settlements accessed via the Wash estuary. The prosperous town of Godmanchester was struck by disaster near the end of the third century. The coin sequence suggests an Allectan (293-296 A.D.) *terminus post quem*.<sup>172</sup> Green speculates that the “scatter of disarticulated human bones and skull fragments” that “appear to have been gnawed by dogs or wolves (...) may be evidence for a massacre” possibly committed by Saxon raiders.<sup>173</sup> Green provides no conclusive evidence for piracy, however, let alone Saxon piracy. Still, Godmanchester’s increasing wealth and subsequent construction of walled defences during the “later third century”<sup>174</sup> indicates it could at least have been a tempting target for pirates. Nevertheless, Godmanchester is merely an isolated incident which can not be directly linked to piracy. Mann remarks that the Saxon Shore forts have been viewed by some scholars:

“(...) in some sense an entirely new creation of the fourth century – a view reinforced by the fact that under its commander are listed nine units, seven of which are totally new to the army of Britain as known in the Principate.”<sup>175</sup>

Nevertheless, the construction dates of the Saxon Shore forts combined with the increasing number of wealthy settlements in south and east England, the increased pirate activity evidenced on the continent, and the marked increase in the number of coin hoards in Britain from the reigns of Aurelian to Maximian (270 A.D. to 305 A.D.)<sup>176</sup> suggest that

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<sup>171</sup> Mann 1989: 9-10

<sup>172</sup> Green 1975: 206

<sup>173</sup> Green 1975: 206

<sup>174</sup> Green 1975: 204 (Excavation at the baths and *mansio* of Godmanchester has revealed a substantial hoard of jewellery and coins)

<sup>175</sup> Mann 1989: 1

<sup>176</sup> Robertson 2000: xxxi, xlix (The remarkable peak in the number of coin hoards during the reign of Tetrici (271-274 A.D.) is generally attributed to Aurelian (270-275 A.D.) devaluation of Tetrician currency,



the Romans had problems containing raiders, but it is difficult to establish who the aggressors were – the hoarding may just as well be explained by civil disorder or possibly even Pictish raids. Some time between 276 A.D. and 285 A.D. it appears that at least ten forts listed in the *Notitia* under the *Litus Saxonicum* had been built, two of which were on the continent.<sup>177</sup> Whether the forts were under a common command, or operating more or less independently, their construction appears to attest to the presence of a seaborne threat. Eutropius adds strength to the argument that the Saxon Shore forts were necessary during the late third century, claiming that the waters around Belgica and Amoric were infested by Saxons and Franks.<sup>178</sup> Scholars have remarked that the textual records say nothing of the coast of Britain, although the Romans could have recognised that seaborne raids in Gaul may soon translate into attacks on Britain, if pirates were not already active there. Another possibility is that the forts doubled as administrative quarters, either at the same time as being garrisoned by troops or in separate periods.

As discussed, both the *Classis Britannica* and the *Classis Germanica* appear to have decayed in the period prior to the construction of the majority of the Saxon Shore forts. According to Haywood's interpretation, they could have been "broken up into smaller, more localised units under legionary control by the fourth century". He argues the *Classis Britannica* underwent reorganisation similar to that of the *Classis Pannonica*.<sup>179</sup> Johnson points to the presence of the *Classis Anderetianorum*, a fleet named after the fort at Pevensey (*Anderitum*), as a sign that the Saxon Shore forts, at one time, probably all had a fleet assigned to them.<sup>180</sup> This would account for the *Classis Britannica*'s disappearance from textual records, and it would make sense from a military perspective. Having smaller fleets stationed at or near each Saxon Shore fort would enhance the chance of intercepting pirates threatening the British coastline. While the original *Classis Britannica* and *Classis Germanica* fleets declined, piracy seems to have become an increasingly big problem for the Romans. To amend the naval deficiencies,

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rendering Tetrician coins nearly worthless, although many people appear to have hoarded them in hope that the currency would become valuable again in the future. (Robertson 2000: xxvii) The Tetrician hoards are thus probably not connected to piracy.

<sup>177</sup> Figure 3, p73 (Map of Saxon Shore forts development)

<sup>178</sup> Eutropius book IX: 21

<sup>179</sup> Haywood 1991: 160

<sup>180</sup> Johnson 1976: 123 (*Notitia Dignitatum*, Occ. XLII 23). Although the *Classis Anderetianorum* is by the time of the *Notitia* stationed in Paris.

Carausius, a Menapian of considerable naval experience, was appointed as commander of the defence of the Saxon Shore. Despite, or maybe because of, Carausius's success, he caught the attention of co-emperor Maximian. Carausius was accused of letting pirates pass through the defences and only later intercepting them, seizing and embezzling the booty the pirates had collected.<sup>181</sup> Eutropius explains that the suspicion of embezzling arose from Carausius "having never given back the entire booty to the people of the province or sent it to the emperors".<sup>182</sup> There is clearly something to be made of the dramatic surge in the number of East English coin hoards during the reigns from Tetrici until Carausius assumed power in Britain, from which point there is a clear decline. Unfortunately, the relatively few Carausian or Allectan coin hoards from East England can not be used to argue whether or not Carausius' efforts were successful, because they say nothing of who ultimately ended up with the (potential) loot.<sup>183</sup> Although Carausius's naval merits were impressive, would it have been easy for him to simply 'allow' pirates through and intercept them on their return? Carausius must have felt quite confident that he could deny some, if not most, of the pirates passage back to their homeland, at the risk of being removed from his position. Still, Carausius' military success may alone have prompted Maximian's actions. Even if Carausius exploited the chance to "enrich himself", it is not clear if he actually 'allowed' pirates passage, or was even able to *deny* pirates passage through the defences. Carausius's efforts appear to have been profitable, in some way, indicated by his defeat of Maximian in 289 A.D.<sup>184</sup> Bird speculates that "most of it (the profits) was used to build a bigger fleet."<sup>185</sup> The present evidence suggests that Germanic pirates were becoming a significant concern during the mid-third century, but that diligent effort under Carausius's command was enough to temporarily check the threat. It seems likely that the Saxon Shore forts played a role in the protection and command of parts of the southern and eastern coastline during the late third - and early fourth century. Following the return of the province of Britannia to Rome in 296 A.D., the Romans seemingly managed to restore the defences to their former efficiency and the

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<sup>181</sup> Eutropius book IX, 21 (see also Aurelius Victor, *de Caesaribus*, 39)

<sup>182</sup> Eutropius book IX, 21

<sup>183</sup> See Robertson 2000: 1 (There is clearer indication of trouble in the West, evidenced by a considerable number of Carausian coin hoards discovered in Wales.)

<sup>184</sup> On the inferred failure of Maximian, see Nixon & Rodgers 1994: 107. The laudatory *Panegyrici Latini* is silent of the outcome of Maximian's expedition in 289 A.D., which suggests he was defeated.

<sup>185</sup> Bird 1994: 167

seaborne threat was kept in check.<sup>186</sup> The crisis of the third century had sent the Western Empire into major disarray, but by the end, Diocletian's reforms had done much to restore order. Unrest still forced Constantine to draw troops from Britain to assist elsewhere, particularly along the Germanic frontier, early in the fourth century. A major issue is that there are few known sources that provide any conclusive evidence on when, and to what degree, Saxon piracy appeared. While there could have been a steady flow of attacks from across the North Sea throughout the second and third century, one can not exclude the chance that there were significant lulls either.

### **Tactical Aspect of the Saxon Shore Forts**

Mann refers to Richmond's (1961) dating of an inscription and pottery from Reculver, which has been used to argue for early Germanic piracy:

“A suggested date in the second decade of the third century led to the assumption that the Saxon threat to the east and south coasts, known later in the third century, had in fact appeared shortly after 210A.D, but the inscription cannot be so closely dated”<sup>187</sup>.

Numerous scholars argue that stylistic differences between the Saxon Shore forts are an indication of when they were constructed. The architecture of Reculver and Brancaster is like that of forts of the early Empire and that has led to a belief that the forts are contemporary with each other. If Richmond's dating is accurate it indicates that the Romans attempted to deal with a Germanic seaborne threat in stages, building some forts, like Reculver and Brancaster, significantly earlier than the rest of the forts, before finding it necessary to upgrade the Saxon Shore system. The dispute about the dating of the Reculver inscription has yet to be resolved. If the ‘suggested date in the second decade of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century’ is inaccurate – and major Germanic threat appeared later still, it is possible that the Romans anticipated the threat and issued the construction of improved military defences on the coast of Britain before the threat surged. Nic Fields remarks that “The construction of these forts represents a huge outlay of money, manpower and materials”.<sup>188</sup> This, combined with the financial trouble and fragmented power in the

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<sup>186</sup> Haywood 1991: 40

<sup>187</sup> Mann 1989: 4 (Further details also in Mann, 1977: 16)

<sup>188</sup> Fields 2006: 5

Roman Empire during the third century limits the likelihood of such a large scale pre-emptive action. Nevertheless, if local rulers in Britain experienced increasing piratical pressure, funds could have been drawn from the province itself to provide for its defence. Britain's growing wealth during the third century is fairly well documented by archaeology, and in panegyrics.<sup>189</sup> Thus it is more likely, were the forts military, that their construction largely mirror the Romano-British experience of pirate threat throughout the third century.

Reculver and Brancaster are constructed in a more conservative style than the other Saxon Shore forts. These two forts are similar to forts built as part of the defences of Hadrian's Wall. Tiles found at Reculver and Brancaster indicate that they were constructed by Roman units previously stationed in the north and that they could have chosen that particular style of construction because they were familiar with it.<sup>190</sup> The other forts on the Saxon Shore are more traditionally Roman in style, with thicker walls and more massive external towers. Some scholars take this as an indication that the forts were constructed in phases, which seems likely at Dover, Burgh Castle and Richborough, where the towers are secondary to the main construction phase. At the sites where towers were added some time after the forts themselves were completed, one may assume that the forts had different purposes at different times – perhaps as civilian customs houses and later as military buildings. More importantly, if the forts were never used in a military sense, why would towers be added to customs houses? It is possible that the towers were added to protect wealth stored within the forts from British brigands, but it is equally questionable whether a domestic or seaborne threat existed to warrant the addition of towers. The towers may appear to make little sense as a countermeasure to Germanic raiders, who were more likely to avoid forts altogether, and were not very apt at attacking walls. Cassius Dio remarks that Germanic barbarians “did not understand the conduct of sieges”<sup>191</sup> and there is little to suggest that the Germanic tribes had improved their siege tactics even by the seventh century.<sup>192</sup> Then again, Germanic ignorance of

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<sup>189</sup> Faulkner 2004: 129

<sup>190</sup> Mann 1989: 4 (See also Figure 6, p76, Plans of Saxon Shore forts)

<sup>191</sup> Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, book 56, 22: 2 (Ammianus Marcellinus writes that Germans rarely laid siege to towns, *Roman History*, book 17, VI:1)

<sup>192</sup> Thompson 1968: 131-140 (Thompson's case for the ineptitude of Germanic siege tactics is strongly supported by a number of texts ranging from the first to the seventh century.)

siege tactics could be argued as a good reason to build imposing walls and towers. Ammianus Marcellinus writes that the Gothic chieftain Fritigern said he “did not war with stone walls” after a failed siege in the late fourth century.<sup>193</sup>

The evidence currently available indicates that most of the forts were finished by 285 A.D., although Portchester could be Carausian, and Pevensey’s construction has been confirmed as of 293 A.D.<sup>194</sup> D.A. White suggests that the system of forts was built by Carausius to defend Britain against Imperial ambitions to recapture the island.<sup>195</sup> It is an interesting theory, which could account for the sheer size of the towers at Richborough, Portchester, Burgh and Pevensey, which were presumably constructed to hold artillery.<sup>196</sup> The presence of the massive towers would perhaps make more sense if other Roman forces, and not barbarians, were the attackers. Still, several of the forts are poorly designed for defence and would stand no chance against a Roman siege. One would expect a skilled military leader such as Carausius (who by 286/7 A.D. controlled the wealth of Britain) to construct a defensive system designed more specifically to counter a Roman threat if that was the purpose of the forts. D.A. White’s theory thus fails to account for the stylistic differences between the forts, the fact that towers were added after the main construction, the evidence that suggests many of the forts were constructed before Carausius’ assumed power in Britain and northern Gaul in 286/7 A.D, and the fact that many of the forts remained in use well into the fourth century. Fulford and Tyers suggest that Allectus’s loss of the port at Boulogne in 293 A.D. exposed Britain to seaborne invasion by the central Roman authorities. This, they argue, was partly the motive for the construction of coastal fortifications.<sup>197</sup> The dating for most of the forts, however, fall outside of the reigns of the usurpers Carausius and Allectan. Still, the loss of Boulogne may have left the Channel more open to piracy, which necessitated the construction of Pevensey during Allectan’s reign in Britain. Ultimately, neither White’s theory, nor the theory of Fulford and Tyers hold up against alternative explanations<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History*, book 31, VI:4

<sup>194</sup> Pearson 2005: 82

<sup>195</sup> White 1961

<sup>196</sup> Johnson 1976: 117-120

<sup>197</sup> Fulford & Tyers 1995: 1009-14

<sup>198</sup> A view also held by Haywood, 1991: 158-159, Cunliffe 1977: 1-2 and Pearson 2005: 82

The addition of towers to several of the forts after they had been constructed points to a heightened level of threat or, at the very least a heightened level of perceived threat from across the North Sea. The military design of the gates at Portchester, Pevensey, Richborough and Lympne indicate that they were constructed to give the occupants advantages for defence. Johnson comments on the flaws of several of the forts where towers were added subsequently to the main construction phase:

“The variations in the plan of the towers (fig 64) show the lack of any standardized building procedure (...) at Burgh castle there is evidence of a failure to grasp the purpose of the towers for tactical defence”.<sup>199</sup>

The external towers at Burgh castle seem to have been built by people who lacked knowledge of defensive tactics. Some of the towers are placed at positions that do not provide effective cross-fire. This anomaly is not found at any other fort where the position and nature of the towers are known. The lack of attention to effective military design could indicate that the towers were merely added to symbolise authority, possibly because the fort only had a civilian function. The differences between the forts suggest that they were built in different periods, by different builders with different orders or plans, however they could also simply be attributed to a difference of opinion between the designers. That the Saxon Shore forts were placed so close to the harbours could also imply that they doubled as administrative facilities, taxing trade and controlling the shores at the same time. The presence of different types of forts and the addition of towers seemingly constructed to hold artillery as a measurement of perceived threat is an inexact science at best. We can hardly assume the forts to accurately mirror a threat that appears to have gone on for centuries, although with varied severity.

### **Strategic Aspect of the Saxon Shore Forts**

In the north-east there are only two Saxon Shore forts, Brancaster and Burgh Castle, which are almost 100 kilometres apart. The next fort southward is Walton Castle, of which only sketches remain and which has not been conclusively identified as a part of the Saxon Shore installations.<sup>200</sup> Then there are Bradwell and Reculver, both on the outer

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<sup>199</sup> Johnson 1976: 115

<sup>200</sup> It is uncertain whether *Portus Adurni* refers to the fort at Portchester or to Walton Castle, but Johnson (1976: 66-68) argues reasonably that *Portus Adurni* is likely Portchester. That does not, however, entail that Walton Castle was not at some stage part of the chain of coastal installations.

limits of the Thames Estuary – which was much traversed by maritime traders. Richborough, Dover, Lympne and Pevensey are all well-placed to control the Straits of Dover.<sup>201</sup> It seems that the objective was to detect and intercept pirates at the narrow straits to stop them from penetrating into the Thames Estuary or through the Straits and to the coast of south Britain or northern Gaul. Still, the strategic placement of the installations is also reasonable were they used as customs houses. It would have been beneficial to place the administrative buildings near the harbour, preferably in an area of significant trade and traffic. Cotterill claims the system of forts was “a series of state trans-shipment centres”, and is unlikely to have been military because most of the forts appeared sixty years prior to the first historical account of Germanic raiding.<sup>202</sup> His argument, however, relies upon the absence of textual record from a period which is ill-represented at best and simply does not allow arguments from omission. Cotterill, Milne, and Wood, who all favour the trans-shipment theory, fail to explain why supply bases would require such elaborate walled defences and towers, or what threat motivated their construction. Cotterill, however, suggests that a logistical role at Brancaster and Reculver explains why they were not upgraded to the standard of defence seen at the forts constructed later in the third century.<sup>203</sup> His assumption that a piratical threat would necessitate such an upgrade is ill-advised (cf. p52-53).

It is natural to ask why the Romans would invest in extensive protection of their coastline—presumed that the forts were defences - if their shores were already settled by the enemy. The question is reinforced by Johnson’s observation that the forts “All the sites lie on comparatively low ground near a harbour”, and are not as suitable against attacks from inland.<sup>204</sup> It is noteworthy that the topography of the areas around forts like Burgh, Brancaster, Richborough and Reculver does not provide good options for elevated defensive positions. Moreover, an elevated defensive position would be of no use if the port was the target, and invasion was not the intention. Scholars have traced a change in Romano-British tactical thinking from the early first century - when the Romans began favouring protection of lowland sites by relying on natural defences other than the

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<sup>201</sup> Figure 4, p74 (Map of Late Roman defences)

<sup>202</sup> Cotterill 1993: 238 (See also Milne 1990: 82-84 and Wood 1990: 93-97)

<sup>203</sup> Cotterill 1993: 238

<sup>204</sup> Johnson 1976: 122

traditional hill-top forts, for example using a meander to protect the flanks of a fortification. Even though some hill-top forts stayed in use, a preference for forts protecting key lowland positions emerged with the growing number of lowland settlements.<sup>205</sup> Thus it is not unreasonable to assume that the Saxon Shore forts were built with the intent of best commanding the shoreline and river inlets, while still harbouring the capacity to withstand direct attack. It is important to remember, however, that forts were not normally intended to be ‘last stands’ against an enemy, but rather to be a base from which to command a surrounding area and launch counter-attacks once an enemy was located. There is no apparent reason why Romans would build forts, seemingly, as defence against a primarily coastal threat if Saxons were already settling on the shores. That implies, of course, that the settled Saxons were not entirely placid or pacified. Thus, the dating and nature of early Saxon settlement plays a role (further, p62-65)

Could the forts have had land-oriented military functions as well? Mann sheds some light on that:

“Archaeologically, there is virtually no evidence of roads connecting any one of the forts with its neighbours and, indeed, with the 40-oared scouting ships that Vegetius describes (4.37); communication by sea could have been almost as fast as by land (...) hardly any roads are known running to the forts from inland”.<sup>206</sup>

Of course, the mere fact that no evidence of land connections between the forts or nearby settlements has been found does not exclude the possibility that roads did indeed exist. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Roman Britain* clearly illustrates that road networks did connect the Kentish forts Richborough, Dover and Lympne.<sup>207</sup> There was seemingly no road connection for the other Saxon Shore forts,<sup>208</sup> however, which seems odd if the forts had functions besides seaborne operations. Mann suggests that the Romans *may* have had additional garrisons further from the shores that could intercept raiders who managed to penetrate inland, a quick reaction force which would be able to defend against attackers on a broader scale given knowledge of where the raiders had, or would, come ashore. He links his argument to the formation of the *Comes Britanniae*, which was a mobile cavalry

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<sup>205</sup> Johnson 1976: 40

<sup>206</sup> Mann 1989: 10

<sup>207</sup> See Figure 5, p75 (Map of Romano-British roads)

<sup>208</sup> Mann 1989: 10-11



force probably created in the last few years of the fourth century.<sup>209</sup> It seems to have been a rapid reaction army that was intended to suppress attacks both from pirates on the Saxon Shore and raids on the northern frontier. Keeping a mobile force that could flexibly respond to attacks may have been necessary when Roman forces were withdrawn from Britain to the continent by reducing the permanent garrisons in the Saxon Shore fortifications.<sup>210</sup> Mann's theory is supported by the Roman strategic shift from static frontier-defences to defence-in-depth, which Faulkner attributes to the many failures of static frontier defences during the third century.<sup>211</sup> Even if Mann's theory is accurate, the *Comes Britanniae* only reflects on the Roman defence strategy in Britain more than a century after the Saxon Shore forts were constructed.

In assessing the size and scale of Saxon raids in Roman Britain, Cotterill claims that since the *Notitia* does not list any fleets related to the Saxon Shore save the *Classis Aderetianorum* (which was stationed in Paris), that no fleet existed in Britain during that time.<sup>212</sup> He relies upon Mann's argument that the *Notitia* is a peacetime document that relates to pay and supply, and concludes that a fleet not listed in the document could not have been paid, and assumes that there were no fleets except for those listed. Cotterill dismisses the possibility of other explanations, but the *Notitia Dignitatum* was not the only, let alone an entirely accurate and exhaustive, document listing Roman forces in the Western Empire.<sup>213</sup> Moreover, Cotterill dismisses Johnson's arguments that the forts would act as a deterrent, because "There are too many rivers and estuaries for a limited number of forts to have been a deterrent: forts or fortlets would have been needed on every river".<sup>214</sup> For a number of reasons, Cotterill's inference simply does not follow. Firstly, the absence of a 'perfect' defence does not entail the absence of a defensive policy. The distribution of Saxon Shore forts clearly indicates an attempt to protect the estuaries and rivers *most* vulnerable to piracy. Secondly, dispersing troops to an even larger number of forts would make little tactical sense, because then even a small number

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<sup>209</sup> Mann 1989: 11 (The force consisted of a small force of 6 cavalry units and 3 infantry units)

<sup>210</sup> Like Clodius Albinus (in 196 A.D.), Magnus Maximus (in 383 A.D.) or Constantius (in 407 A.D.), who took large numbers of troops from Britain to the continent.

<sup>211</sup> Faulkner 2004: 147

<sup>212</sup> Cotterill 1993: 233

<sup>213</sup> Cotterill himself comments the inaccuracies of the *Notitia*, 1993: 234 (The *Notitia* was part of a larger work, see Johnson 1976: 63)

<sup>214</sup> Cotterill 1993: 233

of pirates would be able to overcome the local defence forces. Thirdly, Saxon raiders would not find ‘every river’ a sufficiently attractive target. In the absence of concentrated wealth along its banks, a river would not even be considered attractive at all, thus the Romans would not need to defend all possible points of entry. Pearson argues that the early construction of Brancaster, Reculver and Caister-on-Sea makes no strategic sense because it left Suffolk, Essex, Sussex and southern Kent undefended, and adds that the system of forts would be “unworkable because it was incomplete”.<sup>215</sup> Nevertheless, gaps in the fixed defence could have been plugged by the *Classis*, but as the fleet weakened it was necessary to expand the fortification system. Seaborne raiders would also highly likely concentrate on estuaries which provided many alternative routes to wealthy targets, this to avoid detection, retain the element of surprise, and enable them to attack multiple locations during one journey. In that respect, large stretches of the British coastline, such as southern Kent or between Walton- and Burgh castle, would likely not be preferred by pirates. The early construction of Anglian forts such as Brancaster (and Caister-on-Sea<sup>216</sup>) could, as discussed above (cf. p42-45), be explained by a possible Germanic threat to towns accessible from the Wash, which would provide raiders many alternative routes. Moreover, economic or political problems may have impeded the construction of more forts. Generally, Cotterill and Pearson seem to base many of their arguments on what an ideal defensive strategy for the Saxon Shore would be, strategies that could not have been met by strained Roman forces in Britain. Cotterill suggests that the Saxon Shore forts were the “the creation of a coastal logistical system that extended from the Wash to the Solway Firth”.<sup>217</sup> Nevertheless, the *Notitia* lists the Saxon Shore as a frontier commanded by a military count, and all the forts are linked to garrisons. Clearly, while it is possible that the forts doubled as administrative buildings and featured at some point in a coastal logistical system, there is no reason to dismiss the evidence that the forts were indeed also military in nature, and could easily have served as protection against piracy.

The lack of archaeological evidence for a military presence at several of the supposedly defensive Saxon Shore forts remains one of the biggest obstacles to military interpretation. Although comprehensive modern excavations have yet to be conducted at

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<sup>215</sup> Pearson 2005: 80-81

<sup>216</sup> Which is not listed in the *Notitia Dignitatum*.

<sup>217</sup> Cotterill 1993: 238

several of the forts, the absence of military buildings and material has been used to argue *e silentio* that the structures served no military purpose. There is clear evidence of a military presence at Brancaster, Reculver and Caister-on-Sea.<sup>218</sup> Excavations have proven difficult or have been limited at Bradwell, Walton Castle, Burgh Castle, Dover and Pevensey. Richborough and Lympne have produced indirect evidence of military occupation by what is probably the presence of military baths.<sup>219</sup> Pearson notes that archaeologists have been forced to rely heavily upon the excavations at Portchester to shed light on the functions of the late Saxon Shore system, and remarks that “the possibility exists that traces of timber structures have been overlooked during excavation or else have been destroyed”.<sup>220</sup> Without more detailed excavation of the interiors of the forts, scholars will have to remain cautious about drawing conclusions from the absence of buildings related to military or supply functions. Ultimately, theories that maintain that the system of forts had a military function, and theories that suggest they were a chain of non-military supply bases, both currently lack substantial archaeological evidence from within the forts’ walls.

Another main issue regarding the understanding of the Saxon Shore forts is the occupational sequence at each site. As with the dating of construction, the sparse evidence at each fort limits understanding of their occupational chronology. It appears, however, that most of the forts were abandoned during the second half of the fourth century. Only at Richborough and Portchester did occupation continue into the fifth century, although military use was seemingly discontinued before ca. 370 A.D.<sup>221</sup> Thus, it appears that the majority of the forts could have been abandoned before the so-called ‘Barbarian Conspiracy’ in 367/368. What is to be made of the disuse of the forts remains uncertain, but the danger from Saxons and Franks during the 360s, which Ammianus’ narrative attests to (cf. p60-61), correlates with the end of military occupation at many of the forts. During Magnentius’ attempt to usurp power in the mid-fourth century, he gathered troops from Britain (and elsewhere), but his forces were defeated in a “terrible

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<sup>218</sup> On Brancaster and Reculver, see Johnson 1989: 129-131 & 136-139

<sup>219</sup> Cunliffe 1977: 5 (Possibly also a *principia* at Lympne)

<sup>220</sup> Pearson 2005: 80

<sup>221</sup> Johnson 1976: 62 Note also that Cunliffe speculates that “Occupation probably continued in all the forts” after 370, although the history of the forts after that time is obscure (Cunliffe 1977: 6)

slaughter” in 351 A.D.<sup>222</sup> After the victory, central Roman authorities purged Britain of officers that had supported Magnentius, and killed a “great number of people”.<sup>223</sup> It appears that the garrison in Britain was depleted in the aftermath of Magnentius’ failure. According to Marcellinus, Britain was in 360 A.D. among “the provinces exhausted by former disasters”.<sup>224</sup> These events may have prompted the disuse of the forts and thus added incentive to attack the weakened parts of Roman Britain, as well as parts of Gaul. Pearson, however, suggests the abandonment of the fort system “well before the breakdown of Roman authority in Britain” means the forts’ function was not defensive.<sup>225</sup> He also remarks that “The geographical pattern of abandonment also makes little sense if regarded as the ‘thinning out’ of a defensive scheme”, because several major waterways are left undefended even if Brancaster, Richborough and Portchester may have remained in use in the late fourth century.<sup>226</sup> Pearson’s argument certainly stands to reason, although the possibility remains that the lost Walton Castle<sup>227</sup> was in operation, plugging the gap between Brancaster and Richborough and denying raiders access to the River Deben in Suffolk. The construction of the Yorkshire signal stations<sup>228</sup> during the late fourth century suggest that the Romans were still trying to handle problems in Britain, but that the northern frontier was a priority.

In *Historia Nova*, Zosimus writes that the Quadi<sup>229</sup> sailed along the Rhine and drove out the Sali from an island at the mouth of the Rhine, and later raided Roman territory from their new lands.<sup>230</sup> It took Julian<sup>231</sup> a long campaign to subdue the Quadi, who could well have raided both the coasts in Gaul and Britain during the mid-fourth century, although their attacks are no more specified than to “Roman territory” in general. Although piracy is clearly attested during the mid-fourth century, there is no record of attacks on Britain in the first half of the fourth century. Textual record attests,

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<sup>222</sup> Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, book II (Known as “The battle of Mursa Major”)

<sup>223</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History*, book 14, V:6

<sup>224</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History*, book 20 I:1 (He writes that Britain was troubled by attacks from Picts and Scots)

<sup>225</sup> Pearson 2005: 81

<sup>226</sup> Pearson 2005: 81

<sup>227</sup> Which is not listed in the *Notitia Dignitatum*.

<sup>228</sup> Figure 4, p74 (Map of Late Roman defences)

<sup>229</sup> Possibly an element of the Chauqi living within a larger Saxon community (Haywood 1991: 43)

<sup>230</sup> Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, book 3

<sup>231</sup> Flavius Claudius Julianus, Caesar of the Western provinces from 355, Emperor from 361-363 A.D.

however, to a series of attacks on Britain in the 360s known as the ‘Barbarian Conspiracy’. Ammianus Marcellinus writes that in 364 A.D. there was war “throughout the Roman world” and that “The Picts, Scots, Saxons, and Atacotti harassed the Britons with incessant invasions”.<sup>232</sup> Count Theodosius used the port at Richborough when he arrived with his army from Gaul to defeat the ‘conspiring’ barbarians. Cotterill argues that “it possible that the forts also functioned as transit and holding camps for the movement of mobile units, individual soldiers and imperial messengers”.<sup>233</sup> This contrasts the belief among some scholars that the forts were too small to accommodate a large number of troops. Troops stationed at a fort would not have to reside within the walls to function as a defence against pirates.

The barbarian attacks of 367 were quelled by four legions under Theodosius’ command.<sup>234</sup> That four legions were judged necessary to drive back the barbarians is another fact that suggests the enormity of the onslaught on Roman Britain. In 368 A.D., Ammianus Marcellinus records that the Franks and Saxons were ravaging Gaul “(...) wherever they could effect an entrance by sea or land”. While Ammianus is generally considered a credible historian, he has also been criticised for heaping, possibly, too lavish praise upon Theodosius the elder, who was responsible for the campaign against the ‘conspirators’.<sup>235</sup> Ammianus compiled his work during the reign of Theodosius’ son, and it is possible that Ammianus overstated the threat to Britain in order to favour Theodosius. The lack of archaeological evidence for destruction in Britain has also been remarked, although some sites attest to attacks during the late fourth century, and Hadrian’s Wall shows signs of undergoing repair and reconstruction after 368 A.D.<sup>236</sup>

Marcellinus goes on to say that Theodosius, after the victory against the ‘conspirators’, “(...) restored cities and fortresses, as we have already mentioned, and established stations and outposts on our frontiers (...)”.<sup>237</sup> Theodosius also planned “(...) to seek everywhere favourable situations for laying ambushes for the barbarians.”<sup>238</sup> It is apparent that the expulsion of the barbarians was a difficult process, even for a large

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<sup>232</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History*, book 26, IV: 5

<sup>233</sup> Cotterill 1993: 239

<sup>234</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History*, book 27, VIII:7

<sup>235</sup> Todd 1981: 232

<sup>236</sup> Todd 1981: 233

<sup>237</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History*, book 28, III:7

<sup>238</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History*, book 28, III:1

army. The possible success of Roman defensive reorganization in Britain is reflected by Mann's comments:

“Saxon pressure seems to have subsided after 370. Only at the very end of the fourth century, if we may believe Claudian (*de laudibus Stilichonis* 2.247-55), do the Saxons seem to have re-emerged to threaten Britain. But the threat mounted, to culminate in the attacks of the ‘barbarians from across the Rhine’ (Zosimus 6.5.2-3) which paralleled the end of Roman rule in Britain in 410”.<sup>239</sup>

Nevertheless, the Roman garrison in Britain was dramatically weakened during Magnus Maximus' usurpation of power in 383 A.D., and it is not improbable that piracy remained a problem throughout Maximus' rule in Britain. Claudian refers to a Roman campaign in Britain dated to the late 390s A.D., in which he lauds Stilicho for ‘aiding’ Britain against enemies such as the Scots, Picts and Saxons.<sup>240</sup> The *Notitia*'s information on troops in Britain is believed to have been compiled in the same period, which has led to deviating conclusions on the situation in late Roman-Britain. Haywood argues that the absence of a fleet stationed in Britain implies the Romans had “effectively lost control of the seas to the Saxons and other pirates”,<sup>241</sup> while Cotterill believes there was no fleet in Britain at all.<sup>242</sup> Clearly, Claudian could have overstated the threat to Britain, for poetic or political purposes, but that Rome launched a (final) campaign to restore control over Britain appears to be a testament to the pressure the province was under. Whether pirate threat during the fourth century required the permanent presence of garrisons at some or all of the Saxon Shore forts is unclear.

### **Saxon Shore: interpreted as ‘a shore settled by Saxons’**

An alternative interpretation of the term ‘Saxon Shore’ is that it is a stretch of land upon which the Saxons were settling and/or had settled. The *Notitia Dignitatum* does not give information on when the term ‘Saxon Shore’ was taken into use, so it is hard to connect the term to any specific event, whether settlement of Saxons or construction of forts. The possibility that Saxons had settled in the east of England prior to the end of Roman Britain requires attention because it affects many of the theories on the Saxon Shore

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<sup>239</sup> Mann 1989: 9

<sup>240</sup> Claudian, *Carmina*, XII: *De consulatu Stilichonis*, II

<sup>241</sup> Haywood 1991: 54

<sup>242</sup> Cotterill 1993: 233

system and the size and scale of Germanic piracy. A large influx of independent Saxon settlers would possibly render the Saxon Shore forts ineffective as defence against raiders, since hostile Saxons could raid within Britain without having to pass through the defensive screen. If the Saxon settlers were merely auxiliaries, however, this would not be the case. Evidence of Saxon settlement in Britain prior to the fifth century is scarce, contrary to what one would expect were there Saxons enough to warrant a frontier being named from their presence. Similarly, there is little conclusive evidence of major Saxon settlement in the Gaulish provinces along the Continental *Litus*. Although a frontier name derived from Saxon presence would not necessarily require Saxon settlement on both sides of the Channel it would surely require it on one side. The theories regarding the origin of the term *Litus Saxonicum* tend to be needlessly dichotomous. It is possible that Saxons were both active raiders and had settled on some scale on the shores of Britain. The name, however, only really reflects the time this part of the *Notitia* can be said to have been up to date for this part of the Western Empire. There are some arguments as to why the term ‘Saxon Shore’ could have had a double meaning, merging the two aforementioned theories. Johnson argues that: “There is some slight evidence that as early as the end of the third century there may have been small pockets of Saxons settling in East Anglia, perhaps as part of this policy”.<sup>243</sup> The ‘policy’ to which he refers is the one that the Romans, on occasion, employed various barbarian tribesmen as buffers between them and the most troubled enemy lands, giving the tribesmen some economic benefits in the process. The Romans would also rely heavily upon barbarian auxiliaries towards the end of the Western Empire. Still, it seems unlikely with the aggressive impression the Saxons had made on the Romans, that the latter would deem it safe to use Saxons as any kind of defence against other Saxons. In fact, the Roman policy was to police their provinces with troops that did not speak the language of the natives, to lower the chance of desertion and rebellion. There is evidence of Germanic settlers in many of the lowland *civitates* in the northern regions of Roman Britain. Myers thinks there is reason to believe that Germanic settlers were responsible for the defence of Roman Britain in some northern regions, supported by local levies.<sup>244</sup> If the Saxons were

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<sup>243</sup> Johnson 1976: 7 (Possibility of Germanic elements in Saxon Shore garrison also in Cunliffe 1977: 6)

<sup>244</sup> Myers 1969: 83

employed as auxiliaries, they would probably have been used against other ‘barbarians’ such as the Picts or Irish – and in that respect it would have been impractical to settle them as far away from the front they were intended to defend as south-east Britain. Still, even if the Romans did use various barbarian tribesmen as buffers, this need not have been the case with Saxons in south-east Britain. The central argument of the theory that Saxons were settled in Britain prior to the end of Roman rule relates to archaeological finds, particularly a type of pottery called ‘Romano-Saxon’. Myers, who coined the term, argues that the style merged the traditions of Roman wheel-made pottery with Germanic decorative style.<sup>245</sup> The pottery, though not exactly dated, was made in Roman workshops crafting a special variation of wheel-made pottery. Myers dates the Romano-Saxon pottery pre-A.D. 400 and linked its distribution to the Saxon Shore. Both the dating and the correspondence to the Saxon Shore have been disputed by numerous scholars.<sup>246</sup> Johnson writes that:

“It is difficult, however, to judge whether these pots were being made for communities composed specifically of Saxons: certainly such decorations would have appealed to their tastes, but it is dangerous to base conclusions about the presence of Saxon communities in any area in Britain merely from the consideration of a style of decoration on what are otherwise normal late Roman style of pottery”.<sup>247</sup>

Even if the pottery evidence is inconclusive as an indicator of Saxon settlement, it does suggest that the Romans had some connections to Saxon culture besides warfare, since it is unlikely that Saxons exchanged pottery patterns while they were raiding. The Saxons were not of one mind, but rather of separate agendas relative to their local chiefs. Some Saxons could have come ashore with friendly intentions, trading peacefully and possibly influencing pottery design. The Romano-Saxon pottery is poorly dated, and there are many uncertainties as to the market it was intended for, in fact, at least one piece of Romano-Saxon pottery carried a Latin inscription, so it seems that the style could have

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<sup>245</sup> Unlike their Roman counterparts, Germanic hand-made pottery of the fourth and fifth centuries was traditionally decorated with “knobs and bosses, dimples and depressions, raised collars and cordons, stamps in great variety, and lines in all degrees of emphasis” (Myers 1956: 19)

<sup>246</sup> Roberts IV 1982: 159-167

<sup>247</sup> Johnson 1976: 9-10



been made for Romano-British tastes.<sup>248</sup> It is not impossible that members of the North Sea Germanic tribes could both have been raiders and traders at the same time – or raiders and settlers. If so, the term ‘Saxon Shore’ could well carry a double meaning. Nevertheless, the only evidence for the theory that the ‘Saxon Shores’ were named so because of Saxon settlers is the inconclusive Romano-Saxon pottery,<sup>249</sup> which does not provide much for that theory. The authors of the *Notitia Dignitatum* may have based the name on only one fact, probably the idea of Saxon attacks on the shores, but the two theories are not mutually exclusive.

The Dunkirk II marine transgression that began in the third century has been linked to a perceived increase in Germanic piracy,<sup>250</sup> but Todd believes the marine transgression was not “so drastic as to compel them to seek homes far from their earlier dwellings”.<sup>251</sup> Presently, there is no proof that Germanic people migrated to Britain during the third and fourth century. There is, however, some evidence that the number of Germanic auxiliaries were growing significantly during the early fifth century. Germanic cemeteries have been found near Roman towns in Leicester, Ancaster and Great Chesterford, which combined with the presence of late Roman military equipment, suggests the Germans were auxiliaries and not independent immigrants.<sup>252</sup> It is unclear whether the cemeteries are of Romano-British date. Excavations at Portchester have revealed that housing of the Saxon *Grübenhaus* type was constructed, “these were associated with grass-tempered pottery dating from some period in the fifth century”.<sup>253</sup> However, the German settlement is probably from after the end of the Roman rule in Britain. Indeed, there is no clear evidence of mass immigration to Britain by Saxons or any other Germanic people before the end of Roman control.

## **Summary of Chapter II**

It seems unlikely that Germanic raiders would consider Britain a worthwhile target before Roman occupation, due to Britain’s lack of portable wealth and the considerable effort it would take raiders to get there. Nevertheless, when by the end of the first century Roman

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<sup>248</sup> Haywood 1991: 51

<sup>249</sup> Haywood 1991: 52

<sup>250</sup> Haywood 1991: 28

<sup>251</sup> Todd 1981: 188 (‘Them’ refers to Germanic inhabitants of lower-lying ground)

<sup>252</sup> Todd 1992: 222

<sup>253</sup> Johnson 1976: 62

culture had spread to rural Britain, and mining of precious metals had begun, it would have become an increasingly interesting option for seaborne raiders. The British garrison was on numerous occasions depleted due to usurpation or problems on the continent, which may have encouraged piracy. Clearly, there was at many times ample reason and opportunity for Germanic piracy in Britain, but there is no direct proof of such activity. The absence of piracy can not be concluded, however, due to the poverty of textual accounts of Britain and Germania. At least some of the Saxon Shore forts appear to have served a military purpose during the third century and their inclusion in the *Notitia Dignitatum* under a military *Comes* presupposes they were in military use at least at the end of the fourth century. While the Saxon Shore forts could have been so named due to settlement, there is little evidence for such a theory outside of the inconclusive “Romano-Saxon” pottery.

### CHAPTER III, CONCLUSION

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While this thesis may have raised more problems than it has solved, it has also exposed certain deficiencies in arguments about Germanic piracy in Roman Britain - perhaps most notably in John Cotterill's denial of the possibility that Germanic raiders could have struck across the open North Sea. Germanic seafarers could have reached the shores of Britain without having to travel down the coastline of present day Holland, Belgium and France. At present, however, the argument can not go further than admitting the *possibility* of Germanic open sea travel. While the construction of the militarily garrisoned fort at Brancaster in the early third century suggests a naval threat of Germanic origin coming from across the open sea, the evidence is merely circumstantial. That is also the case with the Antonine Fires, during which the construction of walled defences suggests the presence of a threat of non-urban origin, although *bagaudae* banditry can not be ruled out as a cause.

Another assumption that lacks sufficient evidence is Haywood's suggestion that Chaucian piracy in the North Sea and Channel "probably remained endemic" during the second and third centuries, before being succeeded by Frankish and Saxon piracy.<sup>254</sup> It has been shown that the current evidence suggests the contrary: that piracy emerged only occasionally. According to textual and archaeological evidence, periods of piracy appears to be followed by periods of relative peace. For example, the aftermath of Carausius' or Theodosius' efforts in the late third and fourth centuries respectively, both testify to temporary restoration of control. Another example is the dubious case of the Antonine Fires, which shows that in many settlements walls were abandoned, or construction of walls was discontinued, a few years into the third century. Moreover, while some of the Saxon Shore forts have produced signs of military occupation, most notably Brancaster and Reculver, the apparent periods of inactivity at many of the forts suggests significant lulls in piracy. Occasionally, Haywood appears to overstate Germanic military capacity (cf. p15-16), and he reads too much into Germanic naval success (cf. p29-30)

In recent years, theories that the Saxon Shore forts were designed as a military response to piracy have been met by growing opposition. Until exhaustive excavations are conducted at all the Saxon Shore forts it is unlikely that the arguments about their

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<sup>254</sup> Haywood 1991: 12

purpose will be concluded. The time-span of the forts' construction, diffuse occupational sequences, and irregular abandonment are all still interpretational obstacles. What can be ascertained, however, is that the forts were not continuously in intensive use. Pearson's conclusion thus stands to evidence: "To envisage a uniform role, unchanging throughout their operational lifetime and common to every shore installation, is almost certainly too simplistic."<sup>255</sup> Since Germanic piracy appears to have been sporadic, it is perhaps reasonable to assume that the forts were garrisoned only during pressing times. What turned out to be their ultimate abandonment may have begun as a temporary decommissioning, but the continued decline of the Western Empire following the Barbarian Conspiracy in the 360s may have interrupted any Roman plans of reoccupation. Magnus Maximus' usurpation in 383 A.D. and subsequent transfer of troops from Britain to the continent could have left the forts unmanned. The theories that the Saxon Shore forts served as trans-shipment centres and not as "naval police stations",<sup>256</sup> disregard the military nature of the forts. For example, Milne's argument that the forts were supply bases "worthy of military protection" presupposes a threat which he leaves unspecified.<sup>257</sup> It is possible that potential rebellion, or the simply the desire to display authority, could have motivated the construction of walls and towers. There is, however, little evidence of large scale storage or production from within the forts. Thus theories that the forts were primarily military and theories that they were trans-shipment centres both lack archaeological support. Civilian and military uses of the Saxon Shore forts are not mutually exclusive, and studies of their purpose must be cautious of 'circular cause and consequence' arguments. Clearly, unprotected trade centres could have attracted pirates, which in turn would necessitate a military presence, but it is equally possible that the safety of a chain of fortifications would invite an increase in trade in the protected area - perhaps initially with the garrison itself, then spreading to local settlements. This is a development well-attested along Hadrian's Wall.

This thesis has also shown that there is reason to moderate Johnson and Haywood's claims that the Saxon Shore forts were a defence against invasion (cf. p43),

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<sup>255</sup> Pearson 2005: 84

<sup>256</sup> and <sup>4</sup> Milne 1990: 84

as clearly distinct from seaborne raiding. However, the cost of the ship and the crew, as well as the arduous journey, could have led Germanic raiders to practice seasonal piracy – a tactic favoured by the Vikings. Temporarily camping near the Wash, or the Humber estuary, for example, would have presented a large number of options for seaborne raiders. The distribution of shore installations would provide some protection against this type of hostility, commanding and protecting the large estuaries and river inlets along the coast of East-England. Where there are no shore forts, there are either garrisoned towns (such as Brough-on-Humber, protecting the Humber estuary<sup>258</sup>), or the river inlets are largely scattered or inaccessible – as is the case of the coast between Brancaster and Burgh castle, between Burgh- and Walton castle or between Pevensey and Portchester. Although Cotterill has the impression that an effective defence from pirates requires all river inlets to be protected, this is not the case.

The archaeological absence of conclusively ocean-going vessels of early Germanic origin remains an unresolved part of theories of piracy across the open North Sea. Despite Caesar's records of the seaworthy Venetian ships and accounts of Chaucian and Saxon piracy, it is not clear whether early Germanic pirates operated exclusively in coastal waters or whether they would also navigate the open sea. Nevertheless, the academic divide between 'Celtic' and 'Germanic' maritime capability may be more artificial than actual. The textual record shows Germanic piracy only as an occasional threat to Roman Gaul. There is no reason to believe piracy was at all times a problem in Roman Britain, but lack of textual record is not evidence that there was no piracy. Indeed, historical records of Britain are scarce, and little pertains specifically to the military history of Britain. Similarly, archaeological evidence, such as coin hoards or destruction patterns, is also inherently inconclusive, which leaves little room for *modus tollens* arguments. Ultimately, the study of piracy in Roman Britain hinges upon ill-documented events and equivocal textual records, and it would take very little new information to defeat a number of theories on Germanic piracy.

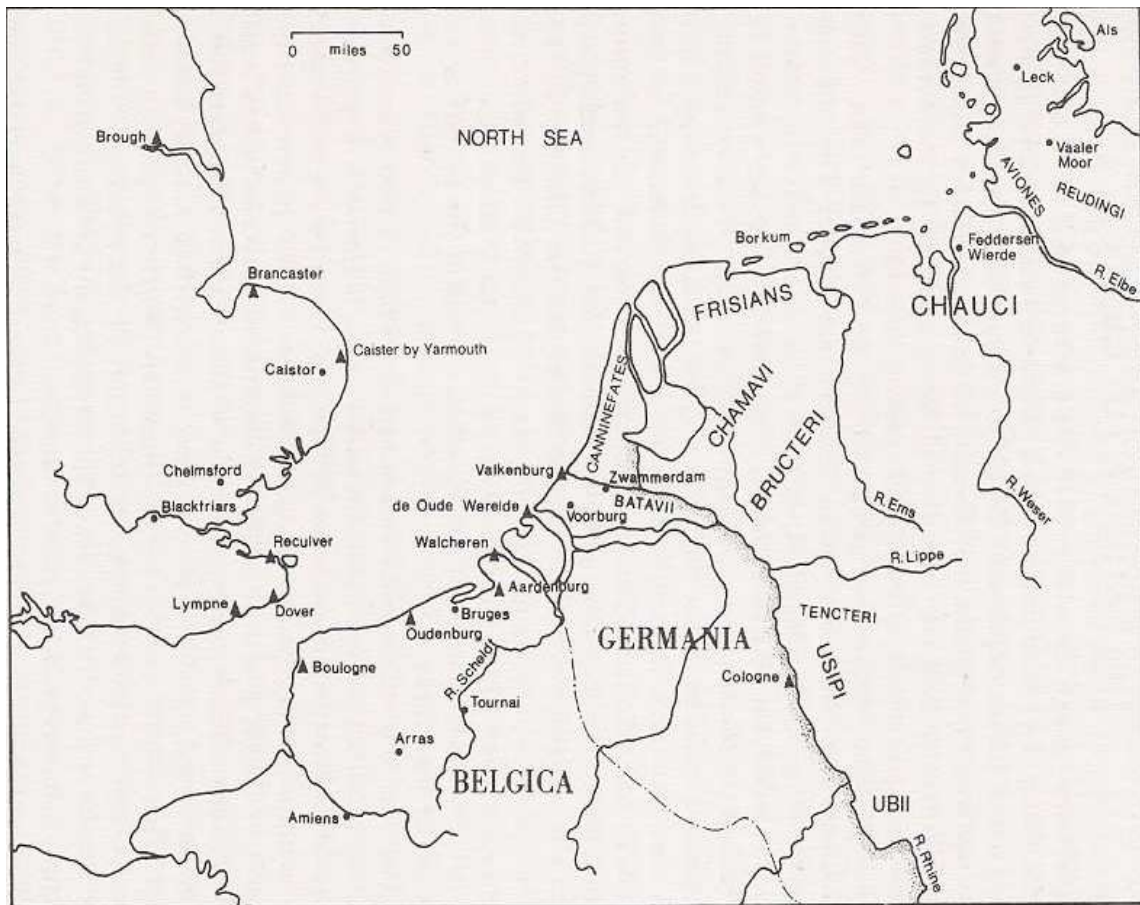
Regrettably, the formal limitations of this thesis have left relevant questions largely unattended. A more comprehensive examination of Germanic piracy in Roman

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<sup>258</sup> An auxiliary fort near Brough-on-Humber was garrisoned during the first and third century, but a military supply depot was kept there throughout Roman rule in Britain. (Cleere 1978: 37)

Britain should consider 1) the continental side of the Litus Saxonicum in greater detail, 2) the Yorkshire signal stations, and include 3) the evidence for Germanic piracy in Belgica and Gaul.

## ILLUSTRATIONS



Map 1 The southern North Sea region, first to second centuries AD (John Haywood) Key: ▲ = military site

**Figure 1** (Haywood 1991: 8) Map of North Sea Germans

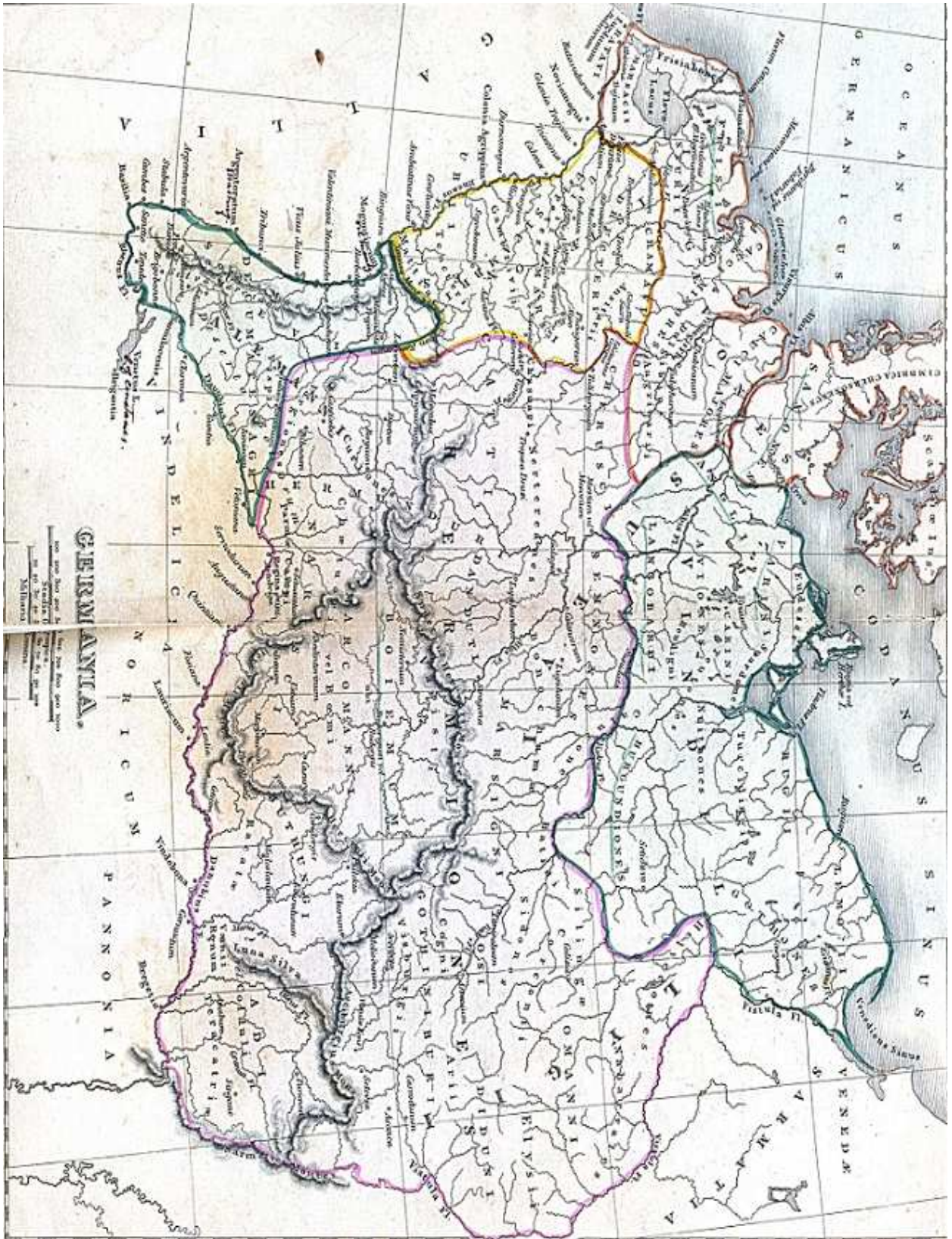
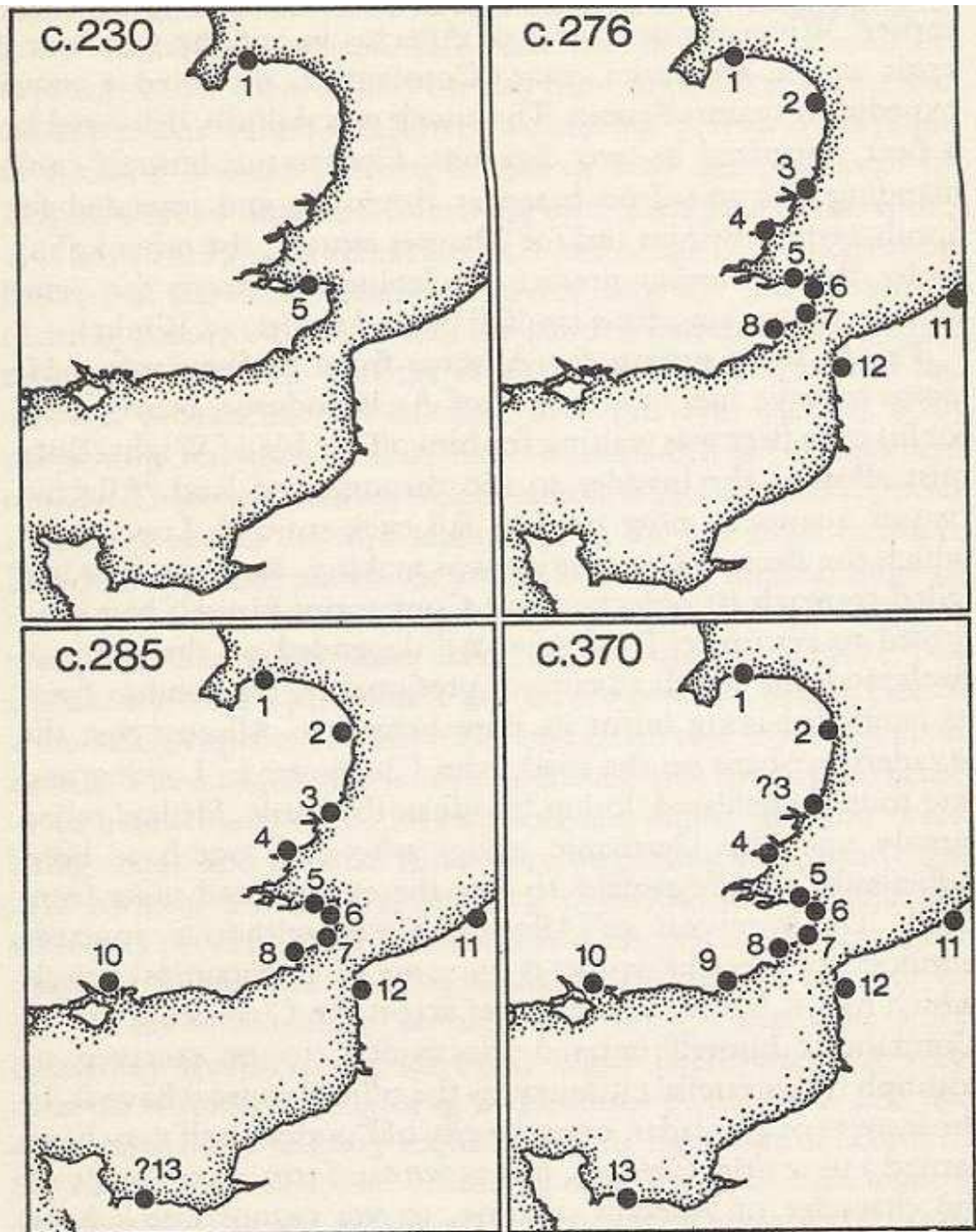


Figure 2 (Findlay, 1849) Map of Germania





24. The development of coastal defences from the late third century. 1. Brancaster. 2. Burgh Castle. 3. Walton Castle. 4. Bradwell. 5. Reculver. 6. Richborough. 7. Dover. 8. Lympne. 9. Pevensey. 10. Portchester. 11. Oudenburg. 12. Boulogne. 13. Port-en-Bessin.

Figure 3 (Todd 1981: 212) Saxon Shore developments

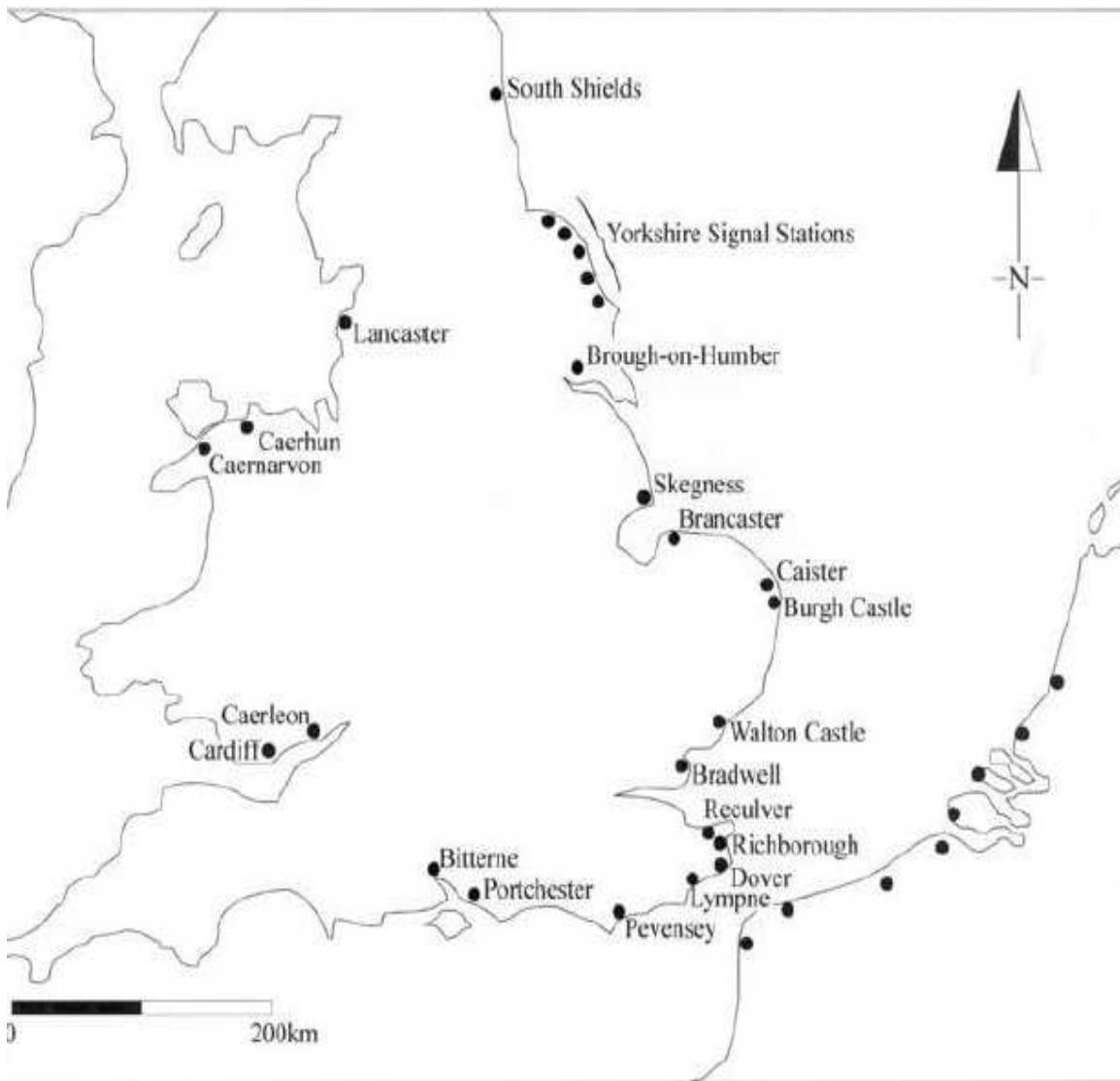
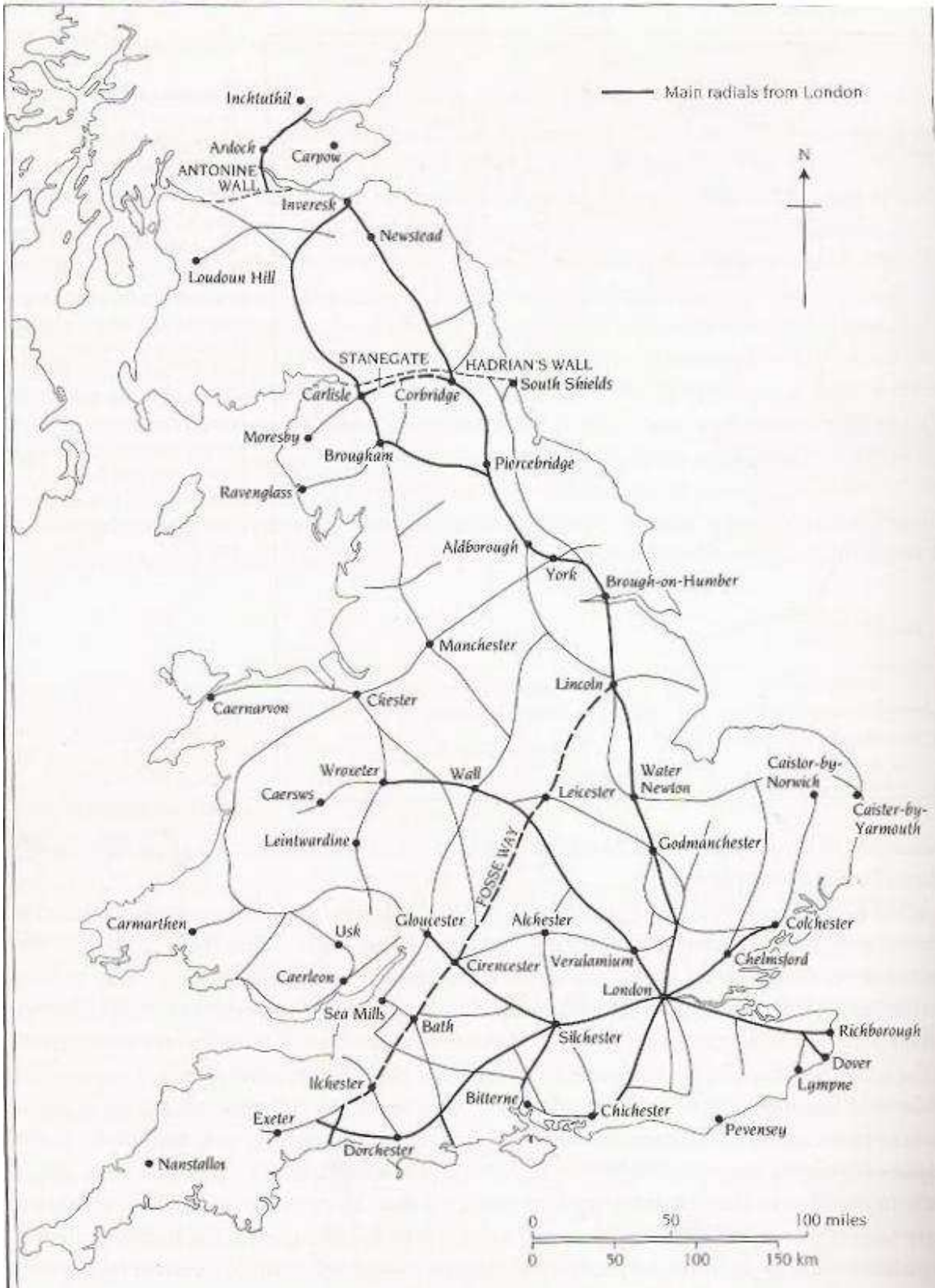


Figure 1  
Late Roman coastal defences.

**Figure 4** (Pearson 2005: 75) Map of Late Roman defences



**Figure 5** Map of Roman Roads in Britain (Salway 1993: 380)

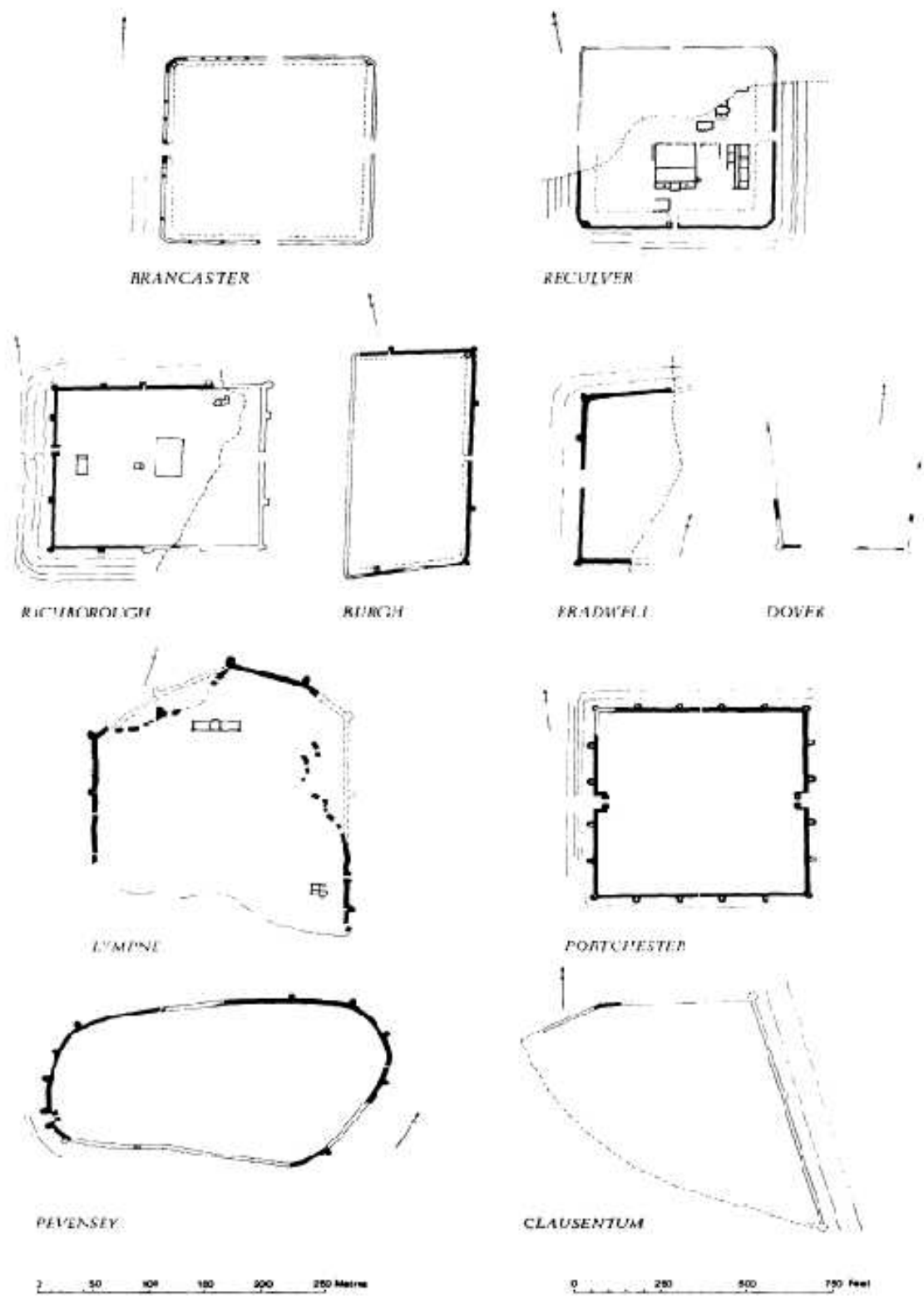


Fig 3 The Shore Forts: comparative plans

**Figure 6** Plans of Saxon Shore forts (Cunliffe 1977: 4)

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