

The Romans

Romans on the Don Teachers Pack – Background Information

The Romans in Doncaster

Invasion. We know that there was contact between Britons in the south east of the country and their Iron Age counterparts in *Gaul* (modern France). In 55 BC *Julius Caesar* had conquered *Gaul* despite help being given to the *Gauls* by some Britons. Caesar then invaded and landed in Britain but was forced back by a combination of bad weather, British resistance, revolts by *Gaulish* tribes, and a threat from Germanic tribes on the continent. Almost a century later the Roman invasion proper began, when *Claudius* invaded Britain in AD 43. After their arrival the *Corieltauvi* soon became part of the Roman Empire but it took nearly 30 years from the invasion before a fort was established at *Danum*. This was because the Romans had quickly created a province within the south east of Britain. The boundary of this province was west of the Roman road known as the Fosse Way which ran from Exeter (*Isca Dumnoniorum*) to Lincoln (*Lindum*), passing Bath (*Aquae Sulis*) and Leicester (*Ratae Coritanum*). They were under threat in the west from tribes in what is now Wales but to the north their boundary was with the *Brigantes* under Queen *Cartimandua*, an ally of Rome. This means that a generation of people living in the area before the fort was built would probably have known of the Romans but seen little of them. Similarly the Romans would have known of the people around what would be *Danum* but had little dealings with them.

Fort and Roads.



The Roman fort at Rossington

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The first Roman fort in the Doncaster region was built at Rossington Bridge sometime in the 50s AD, at the same time as forts were built at Templebrough (Rotherham) and Chesterfield. Rossington fort was built next to the River Torne, to the north-east of where Rossington is today. It was imposed in an area of existing Iron Age fields which would have been evacuated to create an exclusion zone around the fort. Nearby woodland would have been felled to provide the massive amounts of timber needed for the walls, towers and buildings. The garrison was up to half a legion of 2500 men. This may have been a task force sent north to gain control of what was then the northern limit of the new province. Archaeological evidence shows it was only occupied for a short time, perhaps just a few years.



Roman roads were built using precise surveying equipment

The Romans built a fort on the banks of the River Don about AD70. A Roman road from Lincoln to Castleford crossed the Don at this point, the fort and road probably built at about the same time. The fort housed about 500 soldiers and was built initially with a gravel and turf rampart and a single ditch, with timber buildings inside. Around the fort a small settlement known as a *vicus* grew up. Here lived the civilians who were not allowed inside the fort. These included

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administrators, shopkeepers and craftsmen who supplied the army, and the unofficial families of soldiers, soldiers not being allowed to marry. This was the origin of the town of Doncaster. The Romans were the first people to give a name to Doncaster and called it *Danum* after the local name for the river Don (*Dana* or *Danu*).

Another small fort has been found as a cropmark at Burghwallis, to the north of Doncaster. The fort probably dates between the late 1st and early 2nd century and may have housed a unit of auxiliaries. It may have been built as part of the general garrisoning of the region.



The Roman army had many auxiliary troops from throughout the Empire

Houses. Most people continued to live in the countryside during the Roman period, with rectangular houses slowly replacing traditional Iron Age round

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houses. The area around *Danum* was covered by farms and villages set among fields. Many lived in timber rectangular houses enclosed inside ditched compounds. Some Romans and Romanised Britons lived in more luxurious stone houses known as villas. In rural areas these high status houses were associated with farming. However, only the wealthy few could afford villas and there are few examples in the area.



Bread ovens have been found near a Romano-British compound at Stainton

Fields. Initially, the presence of the Roman army in the region is not reflected by wide adoption of Roman practice. Rural houses and field systems follow the pattern of the Iron Age, although some aerial photographs show field systems being cut by roads, showing disregard of land ownership by the newcomers.

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The Lincoln to Doncaster Road, following the line of the Roman road, cuts through ancient fields, the lines of which continue on both sides of the road, indicating the fields were present when the first road was built

Farming. However, an immediate impact would have been the greater demands for farming produce due to the presence of soldiers, their families, and administrators, none of whom are likely to have been involved in food production. There is evidence from *Danum* showing that deer, cattle, pig, sheep, goat, wheat, barley and apples were important elements of the Romano-British diet. Most food would have had to be produced in increasing quantities in the rural areas around the fort. This increased demand may show up in sites such as Barnsdale Bar where there is evidence for increasing numbers of fields between the Iron Age and the second century AD. That apart it seems as if significant changes do not occur for two or three generations.

Pottery. One of the innovations that the Romans brought to the area was an increased use of pottery. Initially pottery would have been imported with the army but eventually, between AD 140 and 300, a local pottery industry developed south-east of *Danum*. Several pottery kilns have been discovered including those at Rose Hill (3km East), Cantley (3.5km East), and Rossington Bridge (7km East). The Rossington Bridge kiln was established between AD 140 and 160 and from here came *mortaria* (mixing basins) that often had the name of the kiln owners stamped into the base. These are some of the earliest known names in Doncaster. They include *Sarrius*, *Setibogius* and *Secundua*. These names imply that they were Britons not Romans. Recent excavations have also found pottery kilns at Holme Hall, probably representing small scale pottery manufacture. Hence, one of the changes that eventually came with

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Romanisation of the area was industrialisation, where some people who would have been farmers instead became manufacturers.



A large-scale pottery industry developed around Doncaster after the Romans arrived

Writing. There is no evidence of Iron Age Britons using writing but the Romans had a written language. They used the *stylus* and wax tablet for general writing use. More important script could be written in ink on thin pieces of wood or scrolls made from animal skin. The *stylus* was made of metal or bone with a point at one end and a flat edge at the other. The point was used to write in the wax and the flat end was used to smooth out mistakes or writing that was no longer required. However, not all Romans were able to read and write. Schools were not very common and education had to be paid for so only the children (usually the boys) from rich families could go. Sometimes children could be educated at home by a slave called a *pedagogue* but again, this meant that the family had to be relatively wealthy.

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Writing implements comprised a stylus and wax tablet

Romanisation. Eventually people living in Britain started adopt Roman practices, known as Romanisation. Even though there is a known local Roman presence from AD71 when the first fort at *Danum* was built, archaeological evidence implies that Romanisation took two or three generations. The earliest changes seem to be in expansion of field systems. This was probably to provide food for the army, its administrators, and its camp followers, none of whom would have produced their own food. Field ditches, which were very deep in the Iron Age, start to be re-cut much shallower. This may reflect simply having less time to carry out the task due to increased farming.

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A Romano-British family share a meal eating from locally made over to tablewares

Round houses continued to be used. Those found at Edlington Wood have artefacts that are Roman rather than Iron Age. Rural rectangular buildings only seem to appear two or three generations after the building of the fort at *Danum*. Similarly, pottery makes a relatively gradual appearance and eventually, over 60 years after the establishment of *Danum* fort, we have evidence for local pottery manufacture at places such as Rossington Bridge and Cantley.

Nationality. Roman soldiers were not strictly from Rome or even Italy. As the Roman Empire expanded so the Roman army was made up of increasing numbers of soldiers recruited from its provinces. The names of military units reflected the place from where they were originally raised, although over time a unit raised in Gaul but stationed in Britain would have been supplemented by local recruitment. It is recorded that in AD 210 a “division of Moors”, actually soldiers from Africa, was sent to defend Hadrian’s Wall. Later records show that by the 4th or 5th century AD the garrison at *Danum* was the *Crispian* Auxiliary Unit, originally raised in the area around *Crispiana* in Western Hungary.

Religion. Iron Age Britons had their own religious practices, the best known being Druidism where specific objects such as trees or springs were worshipped. Water seems to have been particularly sacred, reflected in many finds of objects that were ritually cast into it. The arrival of the Romans would have brought new religions. However, cultural diversity in the Roman army led to religious diversity

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in its ranks. Traditional Roman gods such as Jupiter, Minerva and Mars were worshipped but were added to by gods from other cultures. One such widespread cult was *Mithraism*, possibly having Indo-Iranian origins, where the god *Mithras* was shown as a soldier and promised strength, success and a good life after death. Soldiers also equated Roman gods with native gods and even honoured native gods in their own right.