

**Frisians in Roman Britain**  
**in the Light of the Available Epigraphic Sources**

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses the notion of Frisian presence in both the Roman Britain and the Roman army. It investigates the available Latin sources, which provide us with certain amount of information concerning Frisians' role, significance and distribution during the period of the Roman ruling. Finally, the author tries, on the basis of the available resources, to draw some conclusions regarding the perception of Frisians by both Romans and Brits. All the analyzed materials are taken from the extensive database of the Roman Inscriptions that are to be found in Britain, which is an invaluable source of knowledge of the military tradition of the Roman Empire and the units serving on the Isles. The paper aims at showing the importance of Frisian participation in both Roman invasion and the Adventus Saxonum. It tries to shed a new light on the perception of not only Frisians but all the Germanic tribes.

**Keywords:** Frisians, Roman Inscriptions in Britain, Roman Britain, Germanic tribes.

Place – Britain, a former Roman Province. Time – the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Main characters: the “good” ones – innocent inhabitants of Britain, the “bad” ones – barbarian assailants – Saxons, Jutes, Angles. This is a simplified image presented in the majority of the history textbooks that draws on traditional depiction of the Western Roman Empire. That is how the perception of both Britain, as a secondary and relatively insignificant part of the Empire, and Barbarians as savage pillagers or even murderers, is being ingrained in the minds of generations of people. There is no mentioning or appearance of minor participants of these events such as Frisians.

The image of Barbarians is highly distorted, and therefore deprives them of the well-deserved place in history. There is no denying the fact that the tree mentioned above tribal communities play the most significant role in the Adventus Saxonum. They are all included in the works of Roman historiographers and medieval scribes.

Saxons are to be found in Gildas' *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, whereas Angles are mentioned by Rudolfus Monk of Fulda (Wertzel 2010). Bede the Vulnerable is yet another scribe who writes about these tribes with the use of the following words: "(...) among the time-honored coming of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes" (Bremmer 1989: 168).

A slightly different light on the events is shed by Procopius of Caesarea. The writer in his *Bello Gothico* speaks about 'Angiloi et Frissones' as inhabitants of Britain, which according to some scholars might be a suggestion that Frisians, among other tribes, took part in the invasion on Britain (Fisiak 2004: 34).

Scholars such as Bremmer (1981, 1982, 1990), Cardiff (2001) and Gerrets (1985) have repeatedly brought up the issue of Frisian participation in the invasion of Britain. In the majority of the works focusing on this topic, they try to find the proofs for presence of Frisian peoples among the Germanic tribes migrating to Britain. The analysis of the linguistic, toponimic and archeological materials has already provided us with the unquestionable evidence of Frisian participation in the Adventus Saxonum. The presence of Frisians in Britain before and after that time as well as their role are, however, still not beyond a shadow of a doubt. This article is aimed at expounding on the Frisian matter pertaining to the time preceding the invasion.

Frisians originate from the Jutland Peninsula. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, Frisians already inhabit the areas of present Netherlands next to Batavi and Cananefates, where they constitute a third largest tribal community (Munske 2001). The areas they settle are adjacent to Gaul, which is at the time occupied by the Romans. Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul and the later attempts of the establishment of a new Germania Magna province put Frisians and their neighbours into the circle of interests. Both, the resounding defeat in the Teutoburg Forest as well as the abandonment of the Germania Magna idea do not distract the Romans' interest in Frisians. Due to the plans of Roman invasion on the British Isles, taking control over the coast of Gaul and Frisian territories becomes a priority for the Romans. Tacitus, in his *Annals* (IV 72-73), states that in the year 28 AD Frisians rise in a revolt against the Rome, due to which, a limes is stretched through the Frisian territories. Frisians appear in this clash as skilled and fearless warriors. Their conduct results in future establishment of the Roman auxiliaries composed of only Frisians, and after the death of Caligula (Latin: *Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus*) in 41 AD, during the rule of Claudius (Latin: *Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus*) the factual and systematic invasion on Britain begins.

There is no proof of Frisians taking part in the conquest. What is beyond doubt, however, is that Roman legions were supported by their auxiliaries composed of warriors coming from various tribes. It is also a well known fact that auxiliaries' veterans, after 25 years of their service, were honourably discharged from the military service and could get a citizenship of Rome as well as a piece of their own land. Still, after becoming an integral part of the Roman society, Germanic warriors, including Frisian ones, maintained contact with their own tribes becoming, at the same time, a great source of information for their compatriots in the homeland. The researchers draw their knowledge about these particular events and assume that Frisians inhabited Britain as early as in the 2nd century AD from various inscriptions that are to be found in Britain (Collingwood 1965).

The inscriptions that refer to the military service of Frisians in the Roman troops can be divided into two groups. The first group consists of the inscriptions referring to the unit of auxiliary infantry: *Cohors Primae Frisiavonum- The First Cohort of Frisiavones*, whereas the second group is composed of the inscriptions connected to smaller auxiliary units of Frisian cavalry.

The first group of the inscriptions, systematized and collected in *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain* (1965), includes:

- *CIL VII. 1194* diploma; dated: late AD105
- *Burn 100; CIL XVI.65* diploma dated: July 17<sup>th</sup> AD 122
- *CIL VII.1195* diploma; dated: September 16<sup>th</sup> AD 124
- *L'Année Épigraphique 1997.1779b* diploma dated c.AD 126
- *L'Année Épigraphique 1997.1001* diploma dated 27<sup>th</sup> February AD 158
- Melandra Castle (*RIB 279*)
- Manchester (*RIB 577-579*)
- Carrawburgh (*RIB 1523*)
- Rudchester (*Notitia Dignitatum*)

The second group, collected in *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain* (1965), includes:

- Cirencester ( RIB 109 gabled tombstone)
- Papcastle (RIB 882 altarstone dated: 19-20 Oct AD241)
- Housesteads (RIB 1594 altarstone undated)
- Binchester (RIB 1036 undated)

The inscriptions that bear testimony of Frisian presence in Britain were carved into stone in connection with five matters. The first one refers to the award of Roman citizenship to the veterans, who after 25 years of their service, were honourably discharged from the military service. The award of Roman citizenship was perceived at that time as a very important achievement. Due to that, every such an occasion was to be commemorated with not only a document entry but also with an inscription called a “*diploma*”. Five such inscriptions referring to *The First Cohort of Frisiavones* have been found. Two of them are presented below.

**CIL VII.1194; Diploma dated: AD105**

P CAESAR DIVI NERVAE F NERVA TRAIANVS  
 AVGVSTVS GERMANIC DACICVS PONTIF MAXIMVS  
 TRIBVNIC POTESTAT VIII IMP IIII COS V P P  
 EQVITIBVS ET PEDITIBVS QVI MILITANT IN ALIS  
 DVABVS ET COHORTIS DECEM ET VNA QVAE  
 APPELLANTVR TVNGRORVM ET CLASSIANA  
 C R ET I CELTIBERORVM ET I HISPANORVM  
 ET I LINGONVM ET I FIDA VARDVLLORVM  
 ET I FRISIAVONVM ET I NERVIORVM  
 ET II VASCONVM C R ET II... ET ...ASTVRVM ET ... PANNONIORVM ET ...  
 DELMATARVM ET SVNT IN BRITANNIA SVB  
 ... QVI QVINA ET VICENA PLVRAVE STIPENDIA  
 MERVERVNT QVORVM NOMINA SVBSCRIPTA SVNT  
 IPSIS LIBERIS POSTERISQVE EORVM CIVITATEM  
 DEDIT ET CONVBIVM CVM VXORIBVS QVAS  
 TVNC HABVISSENT CVM EST CIVITAS IIS DATA  
 AVT SIQVI CAELIBES ESSENT CVM IIS QVAS POSTEA  
 DVXISSENT DVM TAXAT SINGVLI SINGVLAS A D III ... C IVLIO BASSO CN  
 AFRANIO DEXTRO COS...NVM CVI PRAEEST P...RIONI...NIS FILIO ...

[For [Im]perator Caesar Nerva Trajanus Augustus Germanicus Dacicus, high priest, holding tribunician power for the ninth time, hailed Imperator in the field four times, consul five times, Father of his Country. To the horsemen and foot-soldiers who are serving in the two cavalry squadrons and eleven infantry cohorts here appended:

Ala [Primae] Tungrorum, Ia [Gallorum et Thracum] Classiana civium Romanorum, Cohors Primae Celtiberorum, Cohors Primae Hispanorum, Cohors Primae Lingonum, Cohors Primae Fida Vardullorum, **Cohors Primae Frisiavonum**, Cohors Primae Nerviorum, Cohors Secundae Vasconum civium Romanorum, Cohors Secundae [...], Cohors [Secundae] Asturum, Cohors [Secundae] Pannoniorum, Cohors [Secundae?] Delmatarum, which are in Britain under [...] Those who have served twenty-five years or more and have received an honourable discharge and whose names are written below. To them and to their children for posterity has been granted the citizenship. Also lawful marriage to their wives they have at that time they are assigned the citizenship, or, if they were unmarried, with those whom they later marry, provided that it be only one woman for one man.

Dated three days before [...] in the consulship of Gaius Julius Bassus and Gnaeus Afranius Dexter

From [...]cum under the command of Publius [..., to the former soldier ...]rionus son of [...]nus of the [...].]

**CIL VII.1195; Diploma** dated: 16<sup>th</sup> September AD 124

IMP CAESAR DIVI TRAIANI PARTHICI F DIVI NERVAE  
 NEPOS TRAIANVS HADRIANVS AVG PONTIF  
 MAXIM TRIBVN POTEST VIII COS III PROCOS  
 EQVITIB ET PEDITIB QVI MILITAVER IN ALIS VI ET  
 COH XXI QVAE APP HISP ASTVR ET I QV...RV...  
 ET ... AL ET PICENTIANA ET ..R.... ET PETRIAN  
 ET ... C R ET I HISP ET I FRISIAVON ET I  
 HAMIOR SAGITT ET I SVNVC ET I VANG ET I BAETASIOR  
 ET I DELM ET I AQVIT ET I MENAP ET I VLP TRAIANA  
 CVGER C R ET I FIDA VARDVLOR C R ET I BATAV ET I TVNGR  
 ET II LING ET II ASTVR ET II DONGON ET II NERV  
 ET III BRACAVGVSTANOR ET III NERV  
 ET VI NERV QVAE SVNT IN BRITANNIA SVB PLATORIO NEPOTE  
 QVINIS ET VICEN PLVRIBVSVE STIPEND EMERITIS DIMISSIS

HONESTA MISSIONE QVORVM NOMINA SVBSCRIPTA SVNT  
 IPSIS LIBERIS POSTERISQVE EORVM CIVITATEM  
 DEDIT ET CONVBIVM CVM VXORIBVS QVAS TVNC  
 HABVISSENT CVM EST CIVITAS EIS DAT ... AVT SIQVI  
 CAELIBES ESSENT CVM EIS QVAS POSTEA DVXISSENT  
 DVM TAXAT SINGVLI SINGVLAS A D XVI K OT  
 C IVLIO GALLO C VALERIO SEVERO COS  
 COH I SVNVCOR CVI PRAEST  
 M IVNIVS CLAVDIANVS  
 EX PEDITE  
 ... ABANI FILIO SVNVCO DESCRIPTVM ET RECOGNITVM EX TABVLA  
 AENEA QVAE FIXA EST ROMAE IN MVRO POST  
 TEMPLVM DIVI AVG AD MINERVAM  
 ]LINI[ ]VRBANI[  
 ]SEVERI[  
 ]PARATI

[The Emperor Caesar Traianus Hadrianus Augustus, son of the deified Traianus conqueror of Parthia, grandson of the deified Nerva, pontifex maximus, in his eighth year of tribunician power, three times consul, proconsul, has granted to the cavalrymen and infantrymen who served in six alae and twenty-one cohorts called : I Hispanorum Asturum and I Tungrorum and) I Thracum and Picentiana and. . . and Petriana, a thousand strong, Roman citizens ; and I Celtiberorum and I Hispanorum and **I Frisiavonum** and I Hamiorum, archers, and I Sunucorum and I Vangionum, a thousand strong, and I Baetasiarum and I Delmatarum and I Aquitanorum and I Menapiorum and I Ulpia Traiana Cugernorum, Roman citizens, and I fida Vardullorum, a thousand strong, Roman citizens, and I Batavorum and I Tungrorum and II Lingonum and II Asturum and II Pannoniorum and II Nerviorum and III Bracaraugustanorum and III Nerviorum and VI Nerviorum which are in Britain under Platorius Nepos, who have served twenty-five or more years and have been honourably discharged, whose names are written below, citizenship for themselves, their children and descendants, and the right of legal marriage with the wives they had when citizenship was granted to them, or, if any were unmarried, with those they later marry, but only a single one each. 16 September in the consulships of Gaius Julius Gallus and Gaius Valerius Severus . To . . . , son of Albanus of the Sunuci, ex infantryman of cohors Sunucorum commanded by Marcus Iunius Claudianus. Copied and checked from the bronze tablet set up at Rome on the wall behind the temple of the deified Augustus near (the statue of) Minerva. Witnessed

by : . . . ; . . . ; . . . Atinius? . . . ; . . . ; Tiberius Julius Urbanus ; . . . Severus; Gaius Julius Paratus]

The presented above examples of inscriptions indicate that Frisians constituted an integral part of the Roman army. It is currently not possible to estimate the number of Frisians who were honourably discharged of the army in Britain. Taking into account the nominal size of the cohort, which counted around 500 men (Potter, 2006), and the fact that it existed from the first century AD to the turn of the fourth and fifth century AD, Rudchester (*Notitia Dignitatum*) must have been of a considerable size. Those people, becoming the Roman citizens, most of the times stayed in the land they had served in, established their families and became the owners of a small piece of land. The claim that Frisians could have established well developed Frisian conclaves in Britain may be supported by the fact that Roman troops that were stationed in Britain recruited to the *Notitia Dignitatum* only the warriors of Frisian origin.

The ones who decided to return to their homeland, were automatically becoming an invaluable source of information as far as geography, administration and military power of Rome was concerned.

The next 4 inscriptions (**RIB 279, 577, 578, 579**) provide the reader with the information referring to the participation of the cohorts in various construction works in Britain.

The first inscription is classified by Collingwood (1965) as ‘**RIB 279**’ and comes from the Malendra castle Longworth, Derbyshire:

**CHO I FRISIAVO C VAL VITALSI**

(The First Cohort of *Frisiavones*, century of Valerius Vitalis [made this]).

Next inscription, or rather a group of inscriptions has been discovered in the Roman MAMVCIVM (Manchester). It is a stone of the cohort which indicates all the stationing in *Mamucium Castellum* Frisian auxillia. Unfortunately, it is impossible to specify the inscriptions’ exact time-frame.

‘**RIB577**’ **COHO I FRISIAV.MASAVONIS P XXIII**

(The First Cohort of *Frisiavones*, century of Masavonius [built] twenty-three feet [of] rampart?)

‘**RIB 578**’ **COHR I FRISIAVIO QVINTIANI P XXIII**

(The First Cohort of *Frisiavones*, [century of] Quintinianus [built] twenty-four feet)

**‘RIB 579’ CVDRENI CHOR I FRISIAV P**

(The century of Cudrenus, from the First Cohort of *Frisiavones*, [built several] feet).

These inscriptions indicate not only the presence of Frisians in the structures of the Roman army but also their ability to construct characteristic for the Romans fortifications and, following on from this, know the Roman strengths and weaknesses. There is no denying the fact that such units were well informed about the construction of the fortifications, this knowledge could be used to the advantage of Germanic tribes which later on began their invasion on Britain (Bremmer, 1981).

The third group of inscriptions, which can be differentiated with reference to the pieces of information they provide us with, consists of the votive inscriptions. Their main role is to certify the fulfillment of particular vows addressed to the gods.

The first such inscription that mentions Frisians comes from the Roman fort Derventio, now Papcastle in Cockermouth in Cumbria, and is dated to 18<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> October 214 AD.

**‘RIB 882’ IN CVNEVM FRISIONVM ABALLAVENSIVM... EX V P XIII KAL ET XIII KAL NOV VSLM GORDIANO II ET POMPEIANO COS**

(for the Formation of Frisians from Aballava [...] former veteran of the praetorian guard, willingly and deservedly fulfilled his vow on the fourteenth and thirteenth days before the *calends* of November, when Gordianus - for the second time - and Pompeius were consuls)

The next inscription is placed on the stone altar from the Roman fort VINOVIA, currently Binchester, Durham:

**‘RIB 1036’ MANDVS EX C FRIS VINOVIE VSLM**

(Mandus, veteran of the Frisian Formation of *Vinovia*, willingly and deservedly fulfilled his vow)

Subsequent inscription comes from Carrawburgh, Northumberland and is considered to be an engraved altarstone.

**‘RIB 1523’ DE CONVETI VOT RETVLIT MAVS OPTIO CHO P FRISIAV**

(To the goddess Coventina, a vow has been repaid by Maus, Optio in the First Cohort of Frisians)



Finally, the last inscription to be mentioned here, is the inscription found on an altar stone from Housesteads and is dated to the time of the Alexander Severus' ruling (222-235 AD)

**'RIB 1594' DEO MARTI ET DVABVS ALAISAGIS ET N AVG GER CIVES TVIHANTI CVNEI FRISIORVM VER SER ALEXANDRIANI VOTVM SOLVERVNT LIBENTES M**

(To the god Mars the two Alaisagae and the divine spirit of the emperor, the German tribesmen from Tuihantis [serving in] the Frisian Formation, true servants of the Alexandrian,<sup>2</sup> willingly and deservedly fulfill their vow.)

All four analyzed inscriptions suggest that Frisians participated in the Roman religious rituals. This may prove the intense assimilation of the Roman customs and traditions. **RIB 1594** depicts information emphasizing the independence and individualism of Frisians. The text mentions not only the Roman god – Mars but also Germanic goddesses Boudihilla and Friagabis (Ewing, 2008). What is even more, the inscription specifies the place of origin of the Frisians – Thuihantis (now Twenthe in Holland) and marks constant influx of the “new” Frisians to Britain.

The last two inscriptions that may be associated with the Frisian units in Britain are “Notitia Dignitatum” and **RIB 109** situated on the altar stone.

“Notitia Dignitatum” enlists the Roman army commanders and civilian leaders in Britain in the fourth and fifth century AD. One of its points mentions the commander of the first Frisian cohort in Vindobala:

***TRIBUNUS COHORTIS PRIMAE FRIXAGORUM, UINDOBALA***

(The tribune of the **First Cohort of Frisians** at Vindobala)

The inscription confirms the existence of the Frisian cohort at the end of fourth century AD. It also signifies the three centuries of Roman-Frisian contacts in Britain.

**RIB 109**, on the other hand, comes from CORINIVM DOBVNNORM, present Cirencester in Gloucestershire. The inscription is put on the ‘Tombstone of Genialis’, the tombstone of a deceased warrior who was a cavalryman of the Thracian unit stationing there in the 60s and 70s of the first century AD.

**'RIB 109' SEXTVS VALERIVS GENIALIS EQES ALAE TRHAEC CIVIS FRISIAVS TVR GENIALIS AN XXXXST XX HSEEF C**

(Sextus Valerius Genialis, a cavalryman of the *Thracian Wing*, a citizen of the *Frisiavones*, from the *Turma* of Genialis. Forty years old with twenty years service. He lies here. The cavalry were responsible for the making [of this memorial])

Even though the last inscription is not connected with the Frisian unit, it presents a Frisian man who, taking into account the length of his service, could have been taking part in the Roman invasion on Britain.

There is a wide evidence supporting the hypothesis that Frisians were present in Britain after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire (Cardiff 2001). All the analyzed inscriptions depict their presence and involvement from before the collapse of the province. Even though they present a small part of the bigger picture, they still indicate that Britain, the former Roman province, was not considered by Frisians of the fifth century AD as *terra incognita*. Thanks to the service in the Roman army, Frisians were familiarized with the modern war techniques, they understood the operation of the Roman administration. Their military service enabled them to get to know the territory of the province and its society. Finally, they became a vital members of the British society who accepted the local traditions and believes. Frisians were present in the Roman Britain from the moment of its conquest to its end.

The evidence of the Frisian presence in the Roman Britain enables us to perceive the Germanic *Adventus Saxonum* not as a barbarian, bloody invasion but as a migration of peoples who seized an opportunity to find a new settling place.

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