

Graham Barker/Sam Moorhead: *The Rebel Emperors of Britannia, Carausius and Allectus*. London: Spink Books 2023. VII, 233 p., 169 ill. £ 30.00. ISBN 978-1-912667-91-8.

Carausius (286–293) and Allectus (293–296) were usurping emperors in Britain and north-western Gaul at the close of the third century. They can be seen as a late example of the long sequence of usurpers that had plagued the middle and later decades of the third century, weakening the political and military coherence of the Roman empire. Equally they can be regarded as the first of a series of usurpers proclaimed in Britain through the fourth century and into the early fifth. The next one was Constantine I in 306, but his treason prospered, so none dared call it that. Carausius' and Allectus' treason prospered only briefly until the forces of the Tetrarchy under Maximian's Caesar Constantius I ('Chlorus') invaded Britain, defeated and killed Allectus, and brought back the eternal light, to quote the Beaurains medallion commemorating the campaign. Because of this Carausius and Allectus remain classed as 'usurpers', and, as the authors of this study rightly state, sources for their reigns are few and problematical. There are texts, namely brief mentions in the later historians Eutropius and Aurelius Victor along with highly partisan denigrations of the rebels in some of the Panegyrics addressed to members of the Tetrarchy: their history was certainly written by the victors. There are also the coin issues of the two emperors, which afford valuable insights into their views of themselves as expressed in the range of obverse titles and propagandistic reverses. The distribution of these issues, as site and isolated finds and their inclusion in hoards, gives an impression of where their writ ran and of some of the events of their reigns. In addition there is the evidence of archaeology: can sites or groups of sites be reliably dated to these ten years and linked to the decisions of the rulers of this 'first British empire', seen even as the 'first Brexiteers' by the deluded?

These evidence types are reflected in the two authors. Sam Moorhead is a highly experienced and respected numismatist, who is preparing the revised "Roman Imperial Coinage" Vol. V.5, covering this period. Graham Barker is described as an "independent researcher" (back cover). Though nowhere are their respective contributions stated, it seems likely that Barker is responsible for the non-numismatic content, though there was probably some overlap between the two authors. This book is an extended treatment of the evidence for the period designed for a general rather than a specifically aca-

demic readership. Its structure is chronological, starting with an otiose chapter on the first two centuries of Roman rule in Britain (“*Britannia* – the Barbaric Land at the Edge of the World”, pp. 4–14), then a chapter sketching in the ‘third century crisis’ (“The Turbulent Third Century – ‘Uneasy Lies the Head that Wears the Crown’”, pp. 15–23), and one acting as a brief introduction to Diocletian and the Tetrarchy (“Diocletian and His Co-Emperor Maximian – Jupiter and Hercules”, pp. 24–35). The core of the book consists of the next six chapters, which look at the usurpation (“Carausius – the Long-Awaited Emperor of *Britannia*”, pp. 36–64) and then reign of Carausius (“The Golden Age of Carausius – *Roma in Britannia*”, pp. 65–107), defensive works against invasion (“Fortress Britain”, pp. 108–124), and the initial imperial response (“Bad Weather in the Channel”, pp. 125–130), then two chapters on Allectus’ murderous replacement of Carausius (“Allectus the Henchman Becomes Emperor – Constantius Recaptures Boulogne, and the Mysterious Death of Carausius”, pp. 131–143) and the former’s downfall at the hands of Constantius (“Re-Invasion – Restoring the Eternal Light of Rome”, pp. 144–178). The book concludes with a chapter on the ‘afterlife’ of Carausius and Allectus down to the present day (“Carausius and Allectus through the Mists of Time”, pp. 179–202). This chronological approach conditions the way in which much of the material is presented, as does an emphasis on the political and military aspects of the period. The work is largely in the ‘emperors and battles’ tradition. It should be noted that, in addition to the province of Britannia, Carausius and Allectus ruled an area of north-western Gaul with a major base at Boulogne and hoards and individual finds of their coins are well represented in that region. That being so, the bibliography (pp. 205–217) displays an aggressively insular approach; of the 200 or so entries fewer than ten are in languages other than English. Even the many publications on their base at Boulogne might as well not exist, likewise publications on their coinages in Gaul. The bibliography is missing items one might have expected, e.g. the final excavation report on the fort at Pevensey by Michael Fulford and Stephen Rippon,¹ and not all the references footnoted make it into the bibliography. Rather than going through chapter by chapter, this review will look at how the main classes of evidence have been treated to gain an impression of the reliability of this work and its arguments.

1 M. Fulford/S. Rippon: Pevensey Castle, Sussex. Excavations in the Roman Fort and Medieval Keep, 1993–95. Salisbury 2011 (Wessex Archaeology Report 26).

To take the coins first, since individually and collectively they can be described and discussed objectively, though of course on that foundation can be erected great edifices of interpretation. Moorhead provides well-informed and illuminating discussion of the coinages, including some truly recondite individual pieces and also up-to-date new finds from hoards, and, for Britain, individual items reported to the Portable Antiquities Scheme.² These are supported by a range of excellent images. Because of the overall chronological structure of the book the consideration of the coinages conforms to this pattern. The early emissions of Carausius are presented, such as the unexpected range of legionary issues. Chapter 5 on “The Golden Age of Carausius” makes extensive and informative use of the legends and imagery on the issues of Carausius to assess his political and religious self-representation, taking up Guy de la Bédoyère’s proposals for the Vergilian expansions of some of the initials on the coinage (e.g. INPCDA expanded as *Iam Nova Progenies Caelo Demittitur Alto*, Vergil, *Eclogue* 4,7). Here and in Chapter 7 Carausius’ trimetallic coinage comes over as complex and subtle with a range of meaningful messages, at least for the literate and educated. How much was this Carausius’ personal doing? By contrast in Chapter 8 the coinage of Allectus, largely copper alloy, comes over as restricted and rather monotone. Clearly the two rulers had divergent ideas on the uses and users of their coins, perhaps also their metal resources had changed, topics that it would have been good to see developed. The structure of the book means that other fruitful lines of numismatic enquiry are simply closed off. There is little about the circumstances of discovery of the coins, particularly the hoard evidence: the schematic Fig. 6.6 (p. 116), which shows the find-spots of Carausian and Allectan hoards in Britain (but not Gaul, *quelle surprise*), is no substitute. Nor is there any real analysis of the coinages as evidence for economic activity. Historicism triumphs over numismatics. Occasionally the treatment of coins veers into the wayward. On p. 45 we are informed that when Carausius retreated to Britain he clearly sailed up the west coast, this on the basis of three gold coins of early types from Wroxeter, Chester and Derbyshire, the last being ‘surmised’ to show a move towards York. Did Moorhead really sign off on this methodological claptrap?

By process of elimination, it seems likely that Barker was the lead author for the sections based on the textual and archaeological evidence (again with

2 <https://finds.org.uk>.

copious, good-quality images). The textual evidence comprises brief mentions in Eutropius and Aurelius Victor along with other brief allusions in the Panegyrics (here unnecessarily and misleadingly renamed “Imperial Court Speeches”, p. 1) and an extended treatment of Constantius’ recovery of the island in *Panegyric* 8. These texts have long been wrangled over as sources for the usurpations of Carausius and Allectus, given the brevity of the historical passages and the extreme bias and rhetorical format of the Panegyrics; how reliable is what is vouchsafed and how are internal contradictions, ellipses and silences to be assessed? This is particularly the case for the extended treatment of the reconquest of Britain in *Panegyric* 8, delivered in the presence of Constantius himself. For this the *communis opinio* seems to be that the basic sequence of events, the splitting of Constantius’ forces in two, the landing in the region of the Isle of Wight, the defeat and death of Allectus in battle, Constantius’ arrival at London (figuring also on the reverse of the Beaurains medallion) are plausible, other elements being laudatory rhetoric. The consideration of these sources here follows in this general tradition and is no less or more convincing than other attempts. But there are features of the consideration that occasion considerable disquiet, for instance in the description of Constantius’ invasion. On p. 149 the first two sentences begin “It can be imagined that [...]”, “It may also be assumed that [...]”. Later on the same page the reader is informed that “All the coastal forts on the south coast would have been fortified and detachments of soldiers would probably have been stationed at key cities and towns.” The common features here are that they go way beyond the available evidence and no reference to published sources is given to support these propositions. This is not an isolated instance; rather this sort of treatment is a recurring feature of the book, especially in the historical and textual sections, and shows a shameful disregard for the rules of evidence and argument, undermining credence in the enterprise as a whole.

The archaeological record for the later third century in Britain (and northern Gaul) is very rich. Can any of this plausibly be linked to Carausius and Allectus as is attempted, especially in Chapter 5? Crucial here is how precisely sites and events can be dated, given that the whole episode of usurpation lasted only ten years; in fact to attribute something to this narrow date bracket is pushing the capabilities of the dating evidence up to and beyond their limits. The principal dating medium is inevitably numismatic, but of course a coin ‘date’ is the date of the minting of a coin, not of its deposition:

thus the ‘date’ is a *terminus post quem*, the deposit in which the coin lies cannot be earlier than the minting of the coin, but how much later than the minting is usually unknowable. This is never really spelled out and its conclusions drawn, instead coins are used to date deposits or structures closely. Occasionally, as at Portchester and Pevensey, the absence of the plentiful coinages of earlier emperors alongside the issues of Carausius and Allectus comforts a date in the period of the usurpation, but that date remains a *terminus post quem*; it could be later. Another dating medium that has a bearing on this question is dendrochronology. On pp. 140 and 141 it is noted that a major riverside monument in London has a dendrochronological date of 294 (“This puts the construction of the buildings squarely into the reign of Allectus”); and that at the shore fort at Pevensey (“The tree ring dating shows that construction began in AD 293.”). This is to misunderstand a dendrochronological date. It is a felling date for the tree, often approximate due to the loss of sapwood: when the timber was used could be later. So like the coins this affords a *terminus post quem*, not an absolute date. In addition, was the felled timber seasoned for an unknown time, and how long did such structures take to construct, especially a major undertaking such as Pevensey? The London waterfront buildings here seen as a statement by Allectus could on the evidence equally well be a victory commemoration by Constantius. The coastal forts such as Pevensey and Portchester along with Burgh Castle, Lympne and Richborough are argued to be Carausian/Allectan defence against invasion. If so, they were spectacularly ill-conceived since in 296 Asclepiodotus landed near the Isle of Wight, in the region of Portchester, and Constantius on his way to London could well have sailed up the Wantsum Channel under the gaze of Richborough. Chapter 5 also bundles together a number of Romano-British sites that happen to have been active at the close of the third century, “a selection of civilian sites” (p. 94), mostly major cities such as Cirencester, London, and Silchester, as well as the important temples at Bath and (especially) Lydney, though the reasons why they are selected are not given. There is also a selection of third-century inscriptions. All this is very well but adds little to our knowledge of the usurping decade, since vanishingly few buildings or inscriptions can be dated to that narrow time bracket.

Carausius had an after-life, even down to modern times (though less so Allectus). At the end of Chapter 9 the intriguing, if scarce, coins struck in the name of Carausius but in the middle of the fourth century are reviewed.

There are too few to draw any firm conclusions, but what does this tell us about the reputation of a usurper from half a century earlier? There is also the sixth-century tombstone from Penmachno (Gwynedd) in north-west Wales bearing the name Carausius. Chapter 10 opens with mediaeval texts mentioning Carausius, namely Nennius, Geoffrey of Monmouth, John of Fordun, Hector Boethius. The discussion admits that these are essentially fabrications based on unknown (if any) sources, but then does the annoying trick of saying that there must be “grains of truth” (p. 184) in amongst it all without offering any objective means of winnowing out grains from chaff. In this case, because Hector Boethius says Carausius sailed up the west coast of Britain to Westmoreland so that this chimes with the untenable proposition based on three coins noted above, this is presumably a ‘grain’. Much more interesting is the revival of interest in Carausius and Allectus when antiquarians and numismatists came across coins of Carausius and Allectus, whose reigns became proxies in historical debates about Britain and empire at the time in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The usurpers are still evoked in more recent literature, usually historical novels; those of us of a certain generation might have appreciated more on Rosemary Sutcliffe’s “The Silver Branch” (1957) where so many first encountered Carausius and Allectus.

It should be clear that in this reviewer’s opinion this is a deeply, deeply flawed book and does the general reader no favours. The numismatic material is fascinating and if only Moorhead could be persuaded to write a monographic treatment of the coinage of Carausius and Allectus (one fears the Introduction to “Roman Imperial Coinage” V.5 will not allow the space) that would be a huge boon to numismatists, students of imperial self-representation and historians and archaeologists of Britain in the Roman period. As for the rest, this reviewer will not be paying it a return visit any time soon.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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