‘A Province Fertile in Tyrants’
Representations of Roman Emperors and Usurpers on the Island of Britain from the Second Century AD Onwards
Call for Papers

Statue of Constantine the Great near York Minster
(work of Philip Jackson, 1998)

In around 415 AD, Saint Jerome, from his retreat in Jerusalem, described the Isle of Britain, at the other end of the Roman world, as a ‘province fertile in tyrants’: ‘Britannia fertilis provincia tyrannorum’ (Jerome, Ep. 133). A century later, the monk Gildas repeated this phrase, ascribing it mistakenly to Porphyry, in his admonitory De Excidio Britanniae (§4.4.).

Indeed, from the end of the second century AD onwards, numerous usurpations originated among the legions stationed on the Island. We can cite Clodius Albinus (193-197), Carausius (286-293), his assassin and successor Allectus (293-296), Magnus Maximus (383-388) and finally, in rapid succession, Marcus (406-407), Gratian (407) and Constantine III (407-411). On a completely different level, but remarkably similar in the way he was perceived by posterity, Constantine I (306-337), son of Constantius Chlorus, was proclaimed emperor at York in 306 and launched his imperial bid for power in Britain; the usurpers at the end of the fourth, beginning of the fifth century were keen to drape themselves in his mantle.

The history and posterity of those emperors and usurpers will be the object of a one day (or more, if response to this call for papers warrants it) symposium, to be held in Boulogne-sur-Mer on Friday, February 9th 2018 (and the following day if necessary).
In keeping with other events organized by the HLLI Research Center – symposiums on ‘Arthur, War and the Sea’ and ‘Memories of Trajan, Memoirs of Hadrian’, seminars on ‘Modern Visions of Medieval Northern Europe’, and ‘Barbarians and Barbary’ – our aim is to study these characters within their specific time frames, through historical, philological and archaeological angles that underscore their link with Britain, and to ascertain how they were perceived in Britain and elsewhere throughout the centuries that followed, from medieval Welsh genealogies to present-day cultural productions (comic strips, historical novels, cinema), including Arthurian novels of the twelfth to fifteenth centuries and figurative arts (illuminated manuscripts, paintings, sculpture, prints, etc.).

This event will be primarily concerned with the eight aforementioned historical characters. In the case of Constantine I, for obvious reasons, we will only consider papers that shed light either on his links with Britain or his singular fortune in the folklore and culture of the Isle. In addition, several other emperors or usurpers, though they were not proclaimed in Britain proper, found support for their rule on the Island or in the Classis Britannica, based at Boulogne. The case of the so-called «Gallic Emperors» may be considered if properly bounded by the limits of this symposium, that is, if the role of Britain and the Fleet are of paramount concern. To conclude, fiction (Arthurian, medieval and, above all, contemporary) has indulged in imagining other usurpers and other imperial bids for power in Britain, alongside those that actually took place. This is fully congruent with the subject matter of this event.

Proposals for papers (title and summary of maximum one page in French or in English, along with a brief CV) should be sent to Alban Gautier (alban.gautier@univ-littoral.fr) before June 15th 2017. Prospective participants must note that travel expenses are not reimbursed. Room and board, however, will be covered by the Organizers (HLLI Research Center and Institut universitaire de France).

Solidus of Magnus Maximus, made in Trier between 383 and 388

The organizers: Alban Gautier, Joëlle Napoli, Marc Rolland.