CHAPTER 2

Estranging the Familiar—Rome’s Ambivalent Approach to Britain

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On the eve of the Roman invasion of Britain, reports Dio, there arose a mutiny among the troops stationed in Gaul, on the banks of the Atlantic Ocean. The soldiers, we are told, were resentful at the thought of conducting a campaign ‘outside the limits of the known world’.1 Whether or not that was the reason for the mutiny, or whether a mutiny took place at all, the fact remains that, to contemporary historians and, by implication, to their readers, there would have been nothing exceptional in perceiving Britain as lying outside the limits of the known world in the year 43 C.E. Indeed, to the audience which regularly fed off imperial propaganda—whether in Rome or elsewhere in the empire—that same perception would not have seemed exceptional even later, since Claudius persisted throughout his reign in celebrating his British achievement as one won in unknown, primitive regions of the world.2 However, a substantial body of evidence speaks strongly for an intense direct relationship between Rome and Britain, the outset of which corresponds to Caesar’s invasions of the island in 55 and 54 B.C.E. This article sets out this long-enduring Roman ambivalence regarding Britain, and ultimately aims to explain a whole century of atypical imperial inaction.

The suggestion that Caesar’s two campaigns on the island left no enduring impression on the relationship between Rome and Britain was made by Strabo,

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1 Dio 60.19: Καὶ οὕτως ὁ Πλαύτιος στρατηγήσας τὸ μὲν στράτευμα χαλεπὰς ἐκ τῆς Γαλατίας ἐξήγαγεν. ὡς γὰρ ἔξω τῆς οἰκουμένης στρατεύσοντες ἠγανάκτουν, καὶ οὐ πρότερον γε αὐτῷ ἐπείσθησαν...[‘Thus it came about that Plautius undertook this campaign, but he found it difficult to lead his army outside of Gaul. For the soldiers were vexed by the thought of carrying on a campaign outside the known world, and would not be prevailed upon...’]. Unless stated otherwise, translations are supplied by the author of the article.

and then again, about a century later, by Tacitus. Each of them probably had reasons of his own for making the claim: Strabo maybe supporting a line opposed to the invasion; Tacitus wishing to aggrandize later campaigns. But Caesar’s achievement, in fact, is likely to have been both significant and enduring. The technical and legal terms—such as deditio (capitulation) and vectigal (impost)—employed by him in his report on the conditions of surrender of the Britons, imply that a British province was possibly in the first stages of being formed. To be sure, treaties had been drawn up, hostages taken, and the tribute that was imposed was in all likelihood paid. There is no reason to doubt that these agreements lasted at least until political changes in Britain had taken place, well into Augustus’ reign. For those emperors who sought it, Caesar had made available ‘legitimate’ claim over Britain.

Regarding Augustus and Tiberius, Tacitus says: ‘and even when there was peace [i.e. from civil war], there was a long oblivion of Britain. Augustus called it policy (consilium), Tiberius—a received precept (praeceptum).’ It may be understood from this statement that the first two emperors did not want to invade Britain. Yet Tacitus’ zeal for the acquisition of Britain is given away all too clearly throughout the Agricola, where he parades the exploits of his father-in-law on the northern parts of the island, and reproves all previous governors of the province who failed to pursue expansion before him. At least with regard to Augustus, it has to be assumed that Tacitus in fact criticizes the reality after the death of the princeps, rather than his actual intents during his lifetime. Literary evidence suggests that Augustus may very well have been on his way to invade Britain more than once.

Dio mentions three instances, in the early 20s BCE, when Octavian/Augustus initiated a campaign against Britain. In the first attempt, interrupted by unrest in Dalmatia, Octavian is said to have wanted to emulate his father. Diplomacy was ultimately preferred in the later attempts. Of course, Augustus’ expansionist ambitions and familiarity with Gaul would have made the consideration of

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3 Strabo 4.5.3; Tac. Agr. 13: ‘So, first of all the Romans, the divine Julius invaded Britain with an army. Although he scared the inhabitants with successful fighting and gained control over the coast, he can be seen to have revealed the island to posterity, not to have delivered it to them.’

4 See more below on both authors and their biases.


6 Tac. Agr. 13.


8 Dio 49.38.2; 53.22.5; 53.25.2.