

CLASSICAL BRITAIN

*There was literature in ancient Britain. Before the arrival of the Romans, it was Greek. Greek also were the gods of the Druids, and the military techniques of the ancient British aristocracy were Homeric. Yet, no literary records of the ancient British have survived to tell us these things directly. Such literary information about ancient Britain as exists today comes indirectly through the descriptions of Roman writers, chiefly **Julius Caesar** (100 BCE - 44 BCE), **Publius Cornelius Tacitus** (cir. 56 - cir. 117 CE) and **Dio Cassius** (155?-235 CE) whose works are excerpted below.*

The Roman conquest of Britain began under the Emperor Claudius in 43 CE and reached its largest territorial extent under Hadrian, whose famous wall across northern Britain in 122-128 CE marked the farthest boundary of Roman control. Throughout the Roman occupation, Celtic peoples to the north and west managed to hang on to their independence, leaving a lasting political and cultural division along lines that roughly correspond to the modern boundaries of England with Scotland to the north and with Wales and Cornwall to the west. Saxon invasions of Roman Britain were underway by 285 CE, and the last Roman legions were withdrawn from the islands in 410 CE.

Our course gives us glimpses of Britain as it progressed from third world status to empire. The story begins with Julius Caesar's accounts to the Roman senate of his attempts to subdue British barbarians and make them surrender grain to Rome. (Grain was to Caesar's Rome as oil is to America today.) Some 1700 years later, in the period where our course will end, John Dryden, Alexander Pope and other British writers in the seventeenth and eighteenth century found the highest form of literary expression to be the imitation and translation of their imperial Roman predecessors!

Caesar, from *The Gallic Wars*, the campaign in Britain of 55 BCE

The Works of Julius Caesar, English tr. W.A. McDevitte and W.S. Bohn [1869] at sacred-texts.com, modernized by Dr. G

4.20 Although Caesar was in Gaul which lies toward the north, where the winters come early, he resolved to advance into Britannia during the brief part of summer that remained. He made this decision because he found that the British had been aiding the enemy in almost all our wars with the Gauls, and even if the remaining season was too short for a full military campaign, yet he thought that the experience would be worthwhile even if he accomplished nothing more than landing on the island, learning the character of the people, and gaining knowledge of their towns, harbors and ports, most of which were unknown to the Gauls. For almost nobody except merchants travel there, and even the merchants know nothing of the territory, except the sea-coast nearest from Gaul. Caesar called in the merchants from the whole region, but he could not learn from them the size of the island, or how many people or nations inhabited it, or what system of warfare they practiced, or what customs they followed, or where harbors might be located suitable for a big fleet of large ships.

4.21 He thought it was wise to send before him Caius Volusenus with a war ship, to acquire knowledge of these things before he in person would go to the island. He ordered him to investigate everything thoroughly, and then to return as soon as possible. He himself proceeded to the Morini [people of the sea, a Belgic tribe] with all his forces. He ordered ships from all parts of the neighboring countries, and the fleet which the preceding summer he had built for war with the Veneti [Celtic people of the Brittany peninsula of France], to assemble in this place. In the mean time, his plans were discovered and reported to the Britons by merchants, and ambassadors came to him from several states of the island, to promise that they would give hostages, and to submit to the government of the Roman people. Having heard them, and making promises, and persuading them to remain in submission, Caesar sent them back to their own country along with Commius, the man whom Caesar created king of the Atrebates [a northern Belgic tribe], after subduing them. He esteemed the courage and conduct of this man, and thought that he would be loyal. He ordered Commius, who was influential in the region, to visit as many states as possible, and persuade them to embrace the protection of the Roman people, and apprise them that soon Caesar would be arriving. Meanwhile Volusenus, having viewed the localities as far as means could be afforded one who did not dare to leave his ship and to trust himself to barbarians, returned to Caesar on the fifth day, and reported what he had seen there.

4.22 While Caesar stayed there procuring ships, ambassadors came to him from a great portion of the Morini, pleading with him to excuse their recent conduct. They alleged that it was as men uncivilized, people unacquainted with our customs, that they had made war upon the Roman people. These ambassadors promised to perform whatever Caesar should command. This was lucky, because he did not want to leave an enemy in the rear behind him, and he did not want to carry on the war against them, either, because of the time of year, and the far greater importance of his enterprise in Britain, so he required that they deliver a large number of hostages, and when these were brought, he received them to his protection. Having collected and provisioned about eighty transport ships, as many as he thought necessary for conveying two legions [estimated to be about 7,000 fighting men plus a large number of support personnel], he assigned commands to the quaestor [Caesar's chief administrator], his lieutenants, and officers of cavalry. Eighteen other transport ships, eight miles from that place, were prevented by winds from being able to reach the same port. These he allotted for the cavalry. The rest of the army which would remain behind, he assigned to Q. Titurius Sabinus and L. Aurunculeius Cotta, his lieutenants, to lead into the territories of the Menapii [a Belgic tribe of northern Gaul] and those locales of the Morini from which peace ambassadors had not come to him. He ordered P. Sulpicius Rufus, his lieutenant, to hold the harbor with such a garrison as he thought sufficient.

4.23 These matters being arranged, finding the weather favorable for his voyage, Caesar set sail about the third watch [night], and ordered the horse to march forward to the next port, and there embark and follow him. As this was performed rather slowly by them, he himself reached Britain with the first squadron of ships, about the fourth hour of the day, and there he saw the forces of the enemy drawn up in arms on all the hills. The nature of the place was this: the sea was confined by mountains so close to it that a dart could be thrown from their summit upon the shore. Considering this by no means a fit place for disembarking, he remained at anchor till the ninth hour, for the other ships to arrive there. Having in the mean

time assembled the lieutenants and military tribunes, he told them both what he had learned from Volusenus, and what he wished to be done; and he ordered them (as the principle of military matters, and especially as maritime affairs, which have a precipitate and uncertain action, required) that all things should be performed by them at a nod and at the instant. Having dismissed them, meeting both with wind and tide favorable at the same time, the signal being given and the anchor weighed, his ships advanced about seven miles from that place, and stationed his fleet over against an open and level shore.

4.24 The barbarians had discovered the Roman plan. They sent down their cavalry and charioteers, a class of warriors that they customarily feature in their battles, and following with the rest of their forces, they tried to stop our men from landing. It was a most difficult situation because our ships were so large that they had to be stationed only in deep water, and our soldiers were unfamiliar with the place. With their hands full, carrying a large and heavy weight of armor, they had to leap from the ships, stand in the waves, and encounter the enemy all at the same time. As for the opponents, either on dry ground, or advancing a little way into the water, their arms were free, and they operated in places thoroughly known to them, so they could confidently throw their weapons and spur on their horses, which were used to this kind of service. Confused by this situation and untrained in this mode of fighting, our men did not all exert the same energy and eagerness that they normally showed in battles on dry land.

4.25 When Caesar saw what was happening, he ordered the ships of war, which looked strange to the barbarians, to come out from among the transport vessels, and to be rowed and stationed toward the open flank of the enemy, and the enemy to be driven off, with slings, arrows, and guns [mechanical dart-throwing machines]. This plan was a big help to our men, for the barbarians were surprised by the form of our ships and the motions of our oars and the nature of our guns, all of which were unknown to them, so they stopped and soon after retreated a little. And while our men were deciding whether they should advance to the shore, chiefly because of the depth of the sea, the standard bearer who carried the eagle of the tenth legion, after praying to the gods that the matter might turn out favorably to the legion, yelled, "Leap, fellow soldiers, unless you want to betray your eagle to the enemy. I will do my part to do my duty to the republic and my general." When he had shouted this, he jumped from the ship and proceeded to carry the eagle toward the enemy. Then our men, exhorting one another that so great a disgrace should not be incurred, all leaped from the ship. When those in the nearest vessels saw them, they quickly followed and attacked the enemy.

4.26 On both sides the battle was fierce. Our men, however, could neither keep their ranks, nor get firm footing, nor follow their standards. As they tried to group in formation from different ships around whatever battle standards they could find, they were thrown into great disarray. The enemy were acquainted with all the shallows, and when from the shore they saw soldiers coming from a ship one by one, they spurred on their horses, and attacked them before they were ready to fight. Many surrounded a few, others threw their weapons upon our collected forces on their exposed flank. When Caesar saw what was happening, he ordered the small boats aboard the ships of war and the spy sloops to be filled with soldiers, to go the aid of those in distress. As soon as they got their footing on dry ground, and all their comrades joined them, our men made an attack that put the enemy to flight. They could not

pursue them very far, because the cavalry had not been able to cross at sea and reach the island. This alone was lacking to give Caesar an accustomed victory.

4.27 Beaten in battle, as soon as they recovered after their flight, the enemy immediately sent ambassadors to Caesar to negotiate a peace. They promised to give hostages and do whatever he should command. With these ambassadors came Commius the Altrebatian, who, as I have above said, had been sent by Caesar into Britain. The barbarians had seized him as soon as he had left his ship. Even though he acted as an ambassador bearing a diplomat's commission to them, they had thrown him into chains, but after the battle was fought, they sent him back, and in suing for peace they cast the blame of that act upon the common people, and begged that their indiscretion be pardoned. Caesar complained that after they had sued for peace, and had voluntarily sent ambassadors to the continent for that purpose, they had made war without a reason, but he said that he would pardon their indiscretion, and he imposed a hostage requirement on them. Some of these hostages they gave immediately; they said that other hostages would arrive in a few days, since they had to be brought from remote places. In the mean time they ordered their people to return to their homes, and the chiefs to assemble from all quarters, and to proceed to surrender themselves and their states to Caesar.

4.28 A peace being established by these proceedings four days after we had come into Britain, the eighteen ships which conveyed the cavalry, set sail from the upper port with a gentle gale. However, when they were approaching Britain and were seen from the camp, so great a storm suddenly arose that none of them could hold their course at sea; and some were taken back to the same port from which they had started, while others, to their great danger, were driven to the lower part of the island, nearer to the west. After having cast anchor, as they were getting filled with water, they were forced to put out to sea in a stormy night, and they turned back for the continent.

4.29 It happened that night to be full moon, which usually brings very high tides in that sea, but that circumstance was unknown to our men. Thus, at the same time, the tide began to fill the ships of war which Caesar had provided to convey over his army, and which he had drawn up on the beach; and the storm began to dash the transport ships together which were riding at anchor. There was no way our men could manage them or keep them from harm. A great many ships having been wrecked, inasmuch as the rest, having lost their cables, anchors, and other tackling, were unfit for sailing, a great confusion, as would necessarily happen, arose throughout the army, for there were no other ships in which they could return, and there was nothing available to repair vessels with. Moreover, grain for the winter had not been brought along, because it had been planned that by all that they would certainly winter in Gaul.

4.30 On discovering these things the chiefs of Britain, who had come up after the battle was fought to perform those conditions which Caesar had imposed, held a conference. They saw that the Romans lacked horses, ships, and grain, and they learned the small number of our troops from the small extent of the camp (which, too, was on this account more limited than ordinary, because Caesar had brought over his legions without full gear). They thought that the best plan was to renew the war, and cut off our men from wheat and supplies and to drag out the whole affair until winter. They felt confident that, if the Romans could be beaten

or cut off from a return, no one ever afterward would pass over into Britain to make war. Therefore, again entering into a conspiracy, they began to depart secretly from the camp by degrees to bring up their forces from the countryside.

4.31 Caesar had not as yet discovered their measures, but both from what had occurred to his ships, and from the fact that the chiefs failed to deliver the promised hostages, he suspected what was going to happen. He therefore provided for the worst. Every day he brought grain from the country parts into the camp, used the timber and brass of the most damaged ships to repair the rest, and ordered whatever things besides were necessary to be brought to him from the continent. All of these orders were executed by the soldiers with the greatest energy, so that he was in position, after the total loss of twelve ships, to make the return voyage well enough in the rest.

4.32 While these things are being done, one legion had been sent to forage, according to custom, and no suspicion of war had arisen as yet, and some of the people remained in the country parts, others went backward and forward to the camp, they who were on duty at the gates of the camp reported to Caesar that a greater dust than was usual was seen in that direction in which the legion had marched. Caesar, suspecting that the barbarians were starting hostilities again, ordered the two cohorts which were on guard duty, to march into that quarter with him, and two other cohorts to relieve them on duty, and the rest of the force to be armed and follow him immediately. When he had advanced some little way from the camp, he saw that his men were overpowered by the enemy and scarcely able to stand their ground, and that, the legion being crowded together, weapons were being cast on them from all sides. Since all the wheat had been reaped in those parts with the exception of one place, the enemy had suspected that our men would go there, and so they had concealed themselves in the adjoining woods during the night. They had attacked suddenly, scattered as the Romans were, and unarmed and engaged in reaping. They killed a small number, threw the rest into confusion, and surrounded them with their cavalry and chariots.

4.33 Their mode of fighting with their chariots is this: first, they drive about in all directions and throw their weapons and generally break the ranks of the enemy with the very fear of their horses and the noise of their wheels; and then when they have worked themselves in between the troops of horse, they jump down from their chariots and engage on foot. The charioteers in the mean time withdraw a short distance from the battle, and so place themselves with the chariots that, if their masters are overpowered by the number of the enemy, they may have a ready retreat to their own troops. Thus they display in battle the speed of horse, together with the strength of infantry. By daily practice and exercise they acquire such expertness that, even on a hillside or on steep terrain, they can check their horses at full speed, and manage and turn them in an instant and run along the pole, and stand on the yoke, and then jump with the greatest speed into their chariots again.

4.34 Under these circumstances, our men were surprised by the novelty of this mode of battle. Caesar brought timely assistance, however, for upon his arrival the enemy retreated, and our men recovered from their fear. He thought the time was not right for provoking the enemy and fighting a battle, so having intervened, he drew back the legions into the camp. The Britons, who were in the fields, also withdrew. Storms then set in for several successive

days, which both confined our men to the camp and hindered the enemy from attacking us. In the mean time the barbarians dispatched messengers to all parts, and reported to their people the small number of our soldiers, and how good an opportunity was given for obtaining spoil and for liberating themselves forever, if they could drive the Romans from their camp. Having by these means speedily got together a large force of infantry and of cavalry they approached the camp.

4.35 Caesar anticipated that the same thing which had happened on former occasions would then occur--that, if the enemy were routed, they would escape from danger by their speed. Still, Caesar had about thirty horse, which Commius the Atrebatian had brought over with him from Gaul, and he drew up the legions in order of battle before the camp. When the action commenced, the enemy were unable to sustain the attack upon our men for long, and they turned their backs. Our men chased after them as far as their speed and strength permitted, and slew a great number of them. Then, having destroyed and burned everything far and wide, they retreated back to camp.

4.36 The same day, ambassadors sent by the enemy came to Caesar to negotiate a peace. Caesar doubled the number of hostages which he had demanded previously, and he ordered that they should be brought over to the continent, because, since the time of the equinox was near, he did not think that, with his ships out of repair, the return voyage should be delayed until winter. Meeting with favorable weather conditions, he set sail a little after midnight, and all his fleet arrived safe at the continent, except two of the transport ships which could not make the same port which the other ships did, and were carried a little lower down the shore.

4.37 When our soldiers, about 300 in number, had been drawn out of these two ships, and were marching to the camp, the Morini, whom Caesar, when setting forth for Britain, had left in a state of peace, excited by the hope of spoil, at first surrounded them with a small number of men, and ordered them to lay down their arms, if they did not wish to be slain. They, however, formed a circle and stood on their defense. A shout was raised and about 6000 of the enemy soon assembled, which being reported to Caesar, he sent all the cavalry in the camp to rescue his men. In the mean time our soldiers sustained the attack of the enemy, and fought most valiantly for more than four hours, and, receiving but few wounds themselves, slew several of them. But after our cavalry came in sight, the enemy threw away their arms, turned their backs, and a great number of them were killed.

4.38 The next day Caesar sent Labienus, his lieutenant, with those legions which he had brought back from Britain, against the Morini, who had revolted. They had no place to which they might retreat, because of the drying up of their marshes (which they had used as a refuge the preceding year), and almost all of them fell into the power of Labienus. In the mean time Caesar's lieutenants, Q. Titurius and L. Cotta, who had led the legions into the territories of the Menapii, laid waste all their lands, cut down their grain and burned their houses, and returned to Caesar because the Menapii had all hidden themselves in their thickest woods. Caesar fixed the winter quarters of all the legions among the Belgae. Only two British states sent hostages to him there; the rest did not send any. For these successes, a thanksgiving of twenty days was decreed by the senate upon receiving Caesar's letter.

[The twenty day celebration was extraordinary. The Roman senate was already afraid of Caesar who eventually would return from Gaul and defeat all rivals in a brutal civil war that would end the Roman republic and inaugurate the empire. Before all of that, however, in the summer following the first adventure Caesar had a second go at Britain. He was better prepared for the second campaign, and he had better military success, fighting his way to the Thames before being forced once again by the approach of winter to withdraw to the continent. His comments on the second invasion include some general description of Britain and the people there.]

Caesar, from *The Gallic Wars*, the campaign against Britain of 54 BCE
The Works of Julius Caesar, English tr. W.A. McDevitte and W.S. Bohn [1869] at sacred-texts.com,
modernized by Dr. G

5.12 The interior of Britain is inhabited by those of whom it is traditionally said that they were born in the island itself, while in the maritime portions live those who had passed over from the country of the Belgae [the region of modern Normandy and Belgium] to plunder and make war. Almost all of them are named after the names of the tribes from which they originated. They went over to Britain to wage war, but stayed there and began to cultivate the land.

The number of the people is countless, and their buildings exceedingly numerous, for the most part very like those of the Gauls. The number of their cattle is great. They use either brass or iron rings, determined at a certain weight, as their money. Tin is produced in the midland regions; iron is produced in the maritime area, but only in small quantity. They use brass, which is imported. There, as in Gaul, is timber of every description, except beech and fir. They do not regard it lawful to eat rabbits, chickens or geese; they breed them instead for their amusement and pleasure. The climate is more temperate than in Gaul, the cold spells being less severe.

5.13 The island is triangular in shape, with one of its sides opposite to Gaul. The shore on that side in Kent faces directly east, and almost all ships from Gaul are directed there. The lower shore extends about 500 miles and looks south toward Spain. Then there is the west side, facing toward Ireland which is reckoned to be half the size of Britain. Crossing from Ireland to Britain is of equal distance with the crossing from Gaul to Britain, but in the middle of this voyage is an island called Mona [Isle of Man]. Many smaller islands besides are supposed to lie there. Of those islands some have written that at the time of the winter solstice it is night there for thirty consecutive days. We enquired about this matter, but learned nothing except that, by accurate measurements with water, we perceived the nights to be shorter there than on the continent. The length of this west side of the triangle is said to be some 700 miles. Off to the north of the island no land is opposite; but an angle from it looks principally toward Germany. The whole east coast is considered to be 800 miles in length, so the whole island has about 2,000 miles in shoreline.

5.14 The most civilized of all the tribes are the people who inhabit Kent, which is entirely a maritime district where the customs differ little from customs in Gaul. Most of the inland inhabitants do not plant grain, but live on milk and flesh, and are clad with skins. All the Britains dye themselves with woad, which causes a bluish color that gives them a more

terrible appearance in fight. They wear their hair long, and have every part of their body shaved except their head and upper lip. Ten and even twelve have wives in common to them, and particularly brothers among brothers, sometimes with fathers and their sons, but if there are any children by these common wives, they are said to be the offspring of those by whom respectively each was first married when a virgin . . .

Some British tribes may have been matriarchal and so rather confusing to the rigidly patriarchal Romans.

In another chapter of the Gallic Wars, describing the Gauls, Caesar gives the most complete ancient description of the Druids and religious practices in early Britain. Caesar's general description of social classes overall as comprised of aristocrats, priests and slaves suggests that the basis for British hierarchical system in the middle ages had already been established in the prehistoric Celtic era. Caesar's account also makes clear that writing was in use, and that British culture had been influenced by the Greeks. Other ancient records indicate that Greeks had sourced tin in Britain for hundreds of years prior to Caesar's time, perhaps as early as the Bronze Age (cir. 1500 BCE).

6.13 Throughout all Gaul there are only two orders of men who are of any rank and dignity: for the common people are held almost in the condition of slaves, who dare to undertake nothing, and are not admitted to any councils. The greater part, when they are pressed either by debt, or the large amount of their tributes, or the oppression of the more powerful, give themselves up in vassalage to the nobles, who possess over them the same rights without exception as masters over their slaves. But of these two orders, one is that of the Druids, the other that of the knights.

The Druids are engaged in things sacred, conduct the public and the private sacrifices, and interpret all matters of religion. To these a large number of the young men come for instruction, for Druids are held in great honor among them. They make the decisions on almost all controversies, public and private; and if any crime has been perpetrated, or if a murder has been committed, or if there is any dispute about an inheritance or any property boundary, these same persons decide it. They decree rewards and punishments. If anyone, either in a private or public capacity, does not submit to their decision, they exclude him from their sacrifices. This among them is the most heavy punishment. Those who have been thus excluded are counted as impious and criminal: all shun them, and avoid their society and conversation, to avoid receiving some evil from their contact. No justice is administered to these outcasts, when they seek it. No dignities are bestowed on them.

Over all these Druids one presides, who possesses supreme authority among them. Upon his death, if any individual among the rest is pre-eminent in dignity, he succeeds; but, if there are many equal, an election is made, or sometimes they contend for the presidency with arms. They assemble at a fixed period of the year in a consecrated place in the territories of the Carnutes [between the Seine and the Loire rivers, in the region of modern Chartres, Orleans and Blois], which is reckoned the central region of the whole of Gaul. All who have disputes assemble in that place from every part, and submit to their decrees and judgments. This institution is supposed to have been invented first in Britain, and then brought over from

there into Gaul, and even now any who want to gain a more accurate knowledge of that system generally go to Britain to study it.

6.14 The Druids do not go to war, nor do they pay taxes with the rest. They have an exemption from military service and other duties. Induced by such great advantages, many choose to embrace this profession, and many others are sent to it by their parents and relations. They are required to memorize a great number of verses; accordingly some remain in the course of training for twenty years. Nor do they regard it lawful to commit these verses to writing, though in almost all other matters, in their public and private transactions, they use Greek characters. That practice of not writing their religious teachings they seem to me to have adopted for two reasons. First, they do not want their doctrines to be known among the mass of the people. Second, those who learn would devote themselves less to the efforts of memory if they could rely on writing. This objection to writing generally occurs to most men, that dependence on writing relaxes diligence in learning and employment of the memory. They try to promote, as one of their leading beliefs, that souls do not perish, but pass after death from one body into another, and they think that men who believe this are inspired with courage, the fear of death being disregarded. They likewise discuss and teach the youth many things about the stars and their movements, about the size of the universe and of our earth, about the nature of things, and about the power and majesty of the immortal gods.

6.15 The other social order is that of the knights. These, when there is occasion and any war occurs (which before Caesar's arrival usually happened every year, as either they on their part were inflicting injuries or repelling others injuring them), are all engaged in war. Those of them most distinguished by birth and resources have the greatest number of vassals and dependents about them. This is how they measure influence and power.

6.16 All the Gauls are extremely devoted to superstitious rites; and on that account they who are troubled with unusually severe diseases, and they who are engaged in battles and dangers, either sacrifice men as victims, or vow that they will sacrifice them, and employ Druids as the performers of those sacrifices. They think that unless the life of a man is offered, they cannot sway the mind of the immortal gods to save a human life, and they have ordained these human sacrifices also for national purposes. Some build figures of vast size, the hollow limbs of which they fill with living men, which being set on fire, the victims perish in the flames. They believe that the burning of such as have been taken in theft, or in robbery, or any other offense, is more acceptable to the immortal gods, but when there are no criminals to burn, they burn the innocent.

6.17 They especially worship as their divinity, Mercury [Hermes, escort of the dead to the afterlife], and they have many images of him, and regard him as the inventor of all arts. They consider him the guide of their journeys and marches, and they believe him to have great influence over the acquisition of gain and mercantile transactions. Next to him they worship Apollo, and Mars [Ares], and Jupiter [Zeus], and Minerva [Athena]. Respecting these deities they have for the most part the same belief as other nations: that Apollo averts diseases, that Minerva imparts the invention of manufactures, that Jupiter possesses the sovereignty of the heavenly powers; that Mars presides over wars. To him, when they have determined to

engage in battle, they commonly vow to sacrifice those things which they shall take in war. When they have conquered, they sacrifice whatever captured animals may have survived the conflict, and collect the other things into one place. In many places you may see piles of these things heaped up in their consecrated spots. It does not often happen that any one dares either to steal this booty or take it to his possession. The most severe punishment, with torture, has been established for such a crime.

6.18 All the Gauls assert that they are descended from the god Dis [Hades, god of the dead], and say that this tradition has been handed down by the Druids. For that reason they compute the divisions of every season, not by the number of days, but of nights. They keep birthdays and the beginnings of months and years in such an order that the day follows the night . . .

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Gaius Cornelius Tacitus (cir. 56-117 CE), whose name ironically means “silent,” became a noted historian of the Roman empire from the period of Tiberius to Domitian, but his writing can be frank in its assessment of the corruption and viciousness of Rome, and in admiration for barbarian love of freedom. Tacitus married into the family of the general Gnaeus Julius Agricola who became governor of Britain from 77 to 85 CE, and he accompanied Agricola in Britain, so his is an eye-witness account.

Tacitus, from *Agricola*, pacification of Britain

The Works of Tacitus, English tr. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb [1864-1877] at sacred-texts.com, modernized by Dr. G

11. Who were the original inhabitants of Britain? Whether they were indigenous or foreign is, as usual among barbarians, little known. Some conclusions may be drawn from the inhabitants’ various physical traits. The red hair and large limbs of the inhabitants of Caledonia [Scotland] point clearly to a German origin. The dark complexion of the Silures [“People of the Rocks,” southern Wales], their usually curly hair, and the fact that Spain is the opposite shore to them, are an evidence that Iberians [Spanish] of a former date crossed over and occupied these parts. Those who are located nearest to the Gauls are also like Gauls in appearance, either from the permanent influence of original descent, or because, in countries so similarly situated, climate has produced similar physical qualities. The Gauls’ religious beliefs may be traced in the strongly-marked British superstitions. The language differs but little. There is the same boldness in challenging danger, but when it is really near, the same timidity in shrinking from it. The Britons, however, exhibit more spirit, as being a people whom a long peace has not yet weakened. Indeed we have understood that even the Gauls were once renowned in war; but, after a while, sloth following on ease crept over them, and they lost their courage along with their freedom. This too has happened to the long-conquered tribes of Britain, but the rest are still as valiant as the Gauls once were.

12. Their strength is in infantry. Some tribes fight also with the two-man chariot. The higher in rank is the charioteer; the lower is the fighter. They were once ruled by kings, but are now divided under chieftains into factions and parties. Our greatest advantage in coping with tribes so powerful is that they do not act in concert. Seldom is it that two or three states agree together to fight off a common danger. Thus, while they fight singly, all are conquered.

Their sky is obscured by continual rain and cloud, but severe cold is unknown. The days exceed in length those of our part of the world; the nights are bright, and in the extreme north so short that between sunlight and dawn you can perceive but a slight distinction. It is said that, if there are no clouds in the way, the splendor of the sun can be seen throughout the night, and that he does not rise and set, but only crosses the heavens. The truth is that the low shadow thrown from the flat extremities of the earth's surface does not raise the darkness to any height, and the night thus fails to reach the sky and stars.

With the exception of the olive and vine, and plants which usually grow in warmer climates, the soil will yield, and even abundantly, all ordinary produce. It ripens indeed slowly, but is of rapid growth because of the excessive rains and moisture of the soil. Britain contains gold and silver and other metals, as the prize of conquest. The ocean, too, produces pearls, but of a dusky and bluish hue. Some think that those who collect them do not work hard enough at it, as in the Red Sea the living and breathing pearls are torn from the shells, while in Britain they are gathered just as they are thrown up by the sea. I believe that the natural properties of the pearls are at fault, not our greediness for gain.

13. The Britons themselves bear cheerfully the conscription, the taxes, and the other burdens imposed on them by the Empire, as long as there is no oppression. They do not take kindly to oppression. They are reduced to subjection, not as yet to slavery. The deified Julius [Julius Caesar, who after death had been declared a god], the very first Roman who entered Britain with an army, succeeded in striking terror into the inhabitants, and he gained possession of the coast. He must be regarded as having indicated the way for future generations to acquire the land, but then came the civil wars [among the Romans], and the arms of our leaders were turned against their country, and even after there was peace, there was a long neglect of Britain. This peace [emperor] Augustus took as policy, and [emperor] Tiberius inherited it. Caius Cæsar subsequently considered an invasion of Britain, but his purposes, rapidly formed, were easily changed after his vast invasions of Germany had failed. Claudius was the first to renew the attempt on Britain; he conveyed over into the island some legions and auxiliaries, choosing Vespasian to share with him the campaign, whose approaching elevation [he would in turn become emperor] started here. Several tribes were subdued and kings made prisoners, and destiny soon identified its favorite.

[Once Vespasian became emperor, he elevated Agricola to become governor of Britain.]

16 . . . under the leadership of Boudicca [queen of Icini in Norfolk area, eastern England], a woman of kingly descent (for they admit no distinction of sex in their royal successions), they all had risen in arms. They had fallen upon our troops, which were scattered on garrison duty, stormed the forts, and burst into the colony itself, the head-quarters, as they thought, of tyranny. In their rage and their triumph, they spared no variety of a barbarian's cruelty. Had not Paulinus heard of the outbreak and brought prompt aid, Britain would have been lost. In one successful battle, he brought it back to its former obedience, though many, troubled by the conscious guilt of rebellion and by particular dread of Paulinus, still kept to their arms.

Excellent as he was in other respects, Paulinus' policy to the conquered was arrogant, and exhibited the cruelty of one who was avenging private wrongs. Accordingly Petronius

Turpilianus was sent out to initiate a milder rule. A stranger to the enemy's misdeeds and so more accessible to their penitence, he put an end to old troubles . .

18. Such was the state of Britain and the war which Agricola found on his crossing over about midsummer. [Tacitus' father-in-law, Gnaeus Julius Agricola, was responsible for the pacification of Britain from 77 – 85 AD] Our soldiers made Agricola's arrival a pretext for carelessness, as if all fighting now was over, but the enemy was still active. The Ordovices ["hammer-fighters," tribe in present day Wales], shortly before Agricola's arrival, had destroyed nearly the whole of a squadron of allied cavalry quartered in their territory. This raised the hopes of the country, and those who wished for war watched to see how the new governor would respond. Agricola resolved to fight, even though summer was past and his troops were scattered throughout the province, even though the soldiers' assumed there would be another year of inaction, and even though the governor's advisors thought it best simply to wait and watch for weak points. Agricola collected a force of veterans and a small body of auxiliaries; then as the Ordovices would not come down into the plain, he put himself in front of the ranks to inspire all with the same courage against a common danger, and he led his troops up a hill. The tribe was almost exterminated.

Well aware that he must follow up the prestige of his arms, and that in proportion to his first success would be the terror of the other tribes, he decided to subjugate the island of Mona, from the occupation of which Paulinus had been interrupted by rebellion, as I have already related. He had no fleet of proper ships, but the skill and resolution of the general accomplished the passage. With some picked men of the auxiliaries, disencumbered of all baggage, who knew the shallows and had that national experience in swimming which enables the Britons to take care not only of themselves but of their arms and horses, he delivered so unexpected an attack that the astonished enemy who were looking for a fleet, a naval armament, and an assault by sea, thought that to such assailants nothing could be formidable or invincible. And so, peace having been sued for and the island given up, Agricola became great and famous as one who, when entering on his province, a time which others spend in vain display and a round of ceremonies, chose rather toil and danger. Nor did he use his success for self-glorification, or apply the name of campaigns and victories to the repression of a conquered people. He did not even describe his achievements in a laurelled letter. Yet by thus disguising his renown he really increased it, for men inferred the grandeur of his aspirations from his silence about services so great.

19. Next, with thorough insight into the feelings of people in his province, and taught also by the experience of others, that little is gained by conquest if followed by oppression, he determined to root out the causes of war. Beginning first with himself and his dependants, he kept his household under restraint, a thing as hard to do for many as ruling a province. He transacted no public business through freedmen or slaves. No private leanings, and no recommendations or requests of friends, moved him in the selection of centurions and officers, but he always promoted the best man, the one whom he thought most trustworthy. He knew what was going on, but did not always act in every case. Trifling errors he treated with leniency, serious offences with severity. Nor was it always punishment, but far oftener penitence, which satisfied him. He preferred to give office and power to men who would not transgress, rather than have to condemn a transgressor. He lightened the exaction of grain and tribute by an equal distribution of the burden, while he got rid of those corrupt schemes for

profiteering which were more intolerable than the tribute itself. Previously the people had been forced to endure the farce of standing in line by a closed granary or of purchasing grain they did not need in order to raise the price artificially. Distribution by-roads to distant places had been limited so that states with a [Roman] winter-camp close to them controlled deliveries of grain to remote and inaccessible parts of the country, until what was within the reach of all became a source of profit to the few.

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Dio Cassius (cir. 155-235 CE) was a Roman Senator and Consul who wrote an extensive history of Rome from the beginnings down to his own time, but only 19 of the original 80 books survive as complete texts. Unlike Tacitus, he is an uncritical apologist for the empire.

Dio Cassius, from *History of Rome*, Boudicca's revolt

*The Works of Dio Cassius, English tr. Earnest Crary [1904-1927]
at sacred-texts.com, modernized by Dr. G*

Book LXIII, Chapter 1 - The Tribes of Britain Revolt. (AD60/61)

1a While [Roman Emperor] Nero was still in Greece, the Jews revolted openly, and he sent Vespasian against them. Also the inhabitants of Britain and of Gaul, oppressed by the taxes, were becoming more angry and inflamed than ever.

Book LXII, Chapters 1-12 (AD61) –Revolt of the Iceni Tribe in Britain under Paulinus

1a At this time an awful disaster occurred in Britain. Two cities were sacked, eighty thousand of the Romans and their allies perished, and the island was lost to Rome. Moreover, all this ruin was brought upon the Romans by a woman, a fact which in itself caused them the greatest shame. **1b** Indeed, Heaven gave them indications of the catastrophe beforehand. For at night there was heard to issue from the senate-house foreign jargon mingled with laughter, and from the theatre outcries and lamentations, though no mortal man had uttered the words or the groans. Houses were seen under the water in the river Thames, and the ocean between the island and Gaul once grew blood-red at flood tide.

2a An excuse for the war was found in the confiscation of the sums of money that Claudius had given to the foremost Britons. These sums Decianus Catus, the treasurer of the island, maintained were to be paid back. Another reason for the uprising was found in the fact that Seneca, in the hope of receiving a good rate of interest, had loaned to the islanders 40,000,000 sesterces that they did not want, and had afterwards called in this loan all at once and had resorted to severe measures in exacting it. **2b** But the person who was chiefly responsible in rousing the natives and persuading them to fight the Romans, the person who was thought worthy to be their leader and who directed the conduct of the entire war, was Boudicca, a Briton woman of the royal family and possessed of greater intelligence than often belongs to women. **2c** This woman assembled her army, to the number of some 120,000, and then ascended a tribunal which had been constructed of earth in the Roman fashion. **2d** In stature she was very tall, in appearance most terrifying, in the glance of her

eye most fierce, and her voice was harsh. A great mass of the tawniest hair fell to her hips ; around her neck was a large golden necklace, and she wore a tunic of diverse colors over which a thick mantle was fastened with a brooch. This was her invariable attire. She now grasped a spear to aid her in terrifying all beholders and spoke as follows:

3a "You have learned by actual experience how different freedom is from slavery. Hence, although some among you previously, may have been deceived by the alluring promises of the Romans, yet now that you have tried both, you have learned how great a mistake you made in preferring an imported despotism to your ancestral mode of life. You have come to realize how much better is poverty with no master than wealth with slavery. **3b** For what treatment is there of the most shameful or grievous sort that we have not suffered ever since these men made their appearance in Britain ? Have we not been robbed entirely of most of our greatest possessions, while we pay taxes on those that remain? **3c** Besides pasturing and tilling for them all our other possessions, do we not pay a yearly tribute for our very bodies? How much better it would be to have been sold to masters once for all than, possessing empty titles of freedom, to have to ransom ourselves every year! How much better to have been slain and to have perished than to go about with a tax on our heads! **3d** Yet why do I mention death ? For even dying is not free of cost with them; nay, you know what fees we must pay even for our dead. Among the rest of mankind death frees even those who are in slavery to others; only in the case of the Romans do the very dead remain alive for their profit. **3e** Why is it that, though none of us has any money (how, indeed, could we, or where could we get it?), we are stripped and despoiled like a murderer's victims? And why should the Romans be expected to display moderation as time goes on, when they have behaved toward us in this fashion at the very outset, when all men show consideration even for the beasts they have newly captured?

4a "But to speak the plain truth, we ourselves are responsible for all these evils, because we allowed the Romans to set foot on the island in the first place instead of expelling them at once as we did their famous Julius Caesar. Yes, we should have dealt with them while they were still far away, as we dealt with Augustus and with Caligula. We should have made their attempt to sail here a more formidable thing. **4b** As a consequence, although we inhabit so large an island, or rather a continent, one might say, that is encircled by the sea, and although we possess a veritable world of our own and are so separated by the ocean from all the rest of mankind that we have been believed to dwell on a different earth and under a different sky, and that some of the outside world, aye, even their wisest men, have not hitherto known for a certainty even by what name we are called, we have, notwithstanding all this, been despised and trampled underfoot by men who know nothing else than how to take gain from us. **4c** However, even at this late day, though we have not done so before, let us, my countrymen and friends and kinsmen -- for I consider you all kinsmen, seeing that you inhabit a single island and are called by one common name -- let us, I say, do our duty while we still remember what freedom is, that we may leave to our children not only its name but also its reality. For, if we utterly forget the happy state in which we were born and bred, what, pray, will they do, reared in slavery?

5a "All this I say, not with the purpose of inspiring you with a hatred of present conditions -- that hatred you already have. Nor do I say this to make you fear for the future -- that fear you

already have. I praise you now because of your own accord you choose the right course of action, and co-operate with me and with each other. **5b** Have no fear whatever of the Romans, for they are superior to us neither in numbers nor in bravery. Here is the proof: they have protected themselves with helmets and breastplates and greaves and yet further provided themselves with palisades and walls and trenches to make sure of suffering no harm by an incursion of their enemies. For they are led by their fears when they adopt this kind of fighting in preference to the plan we follow of rough and ready action. **5c** Indeed, we enjoy such a surplus of bravery, that we regard our tents as safer than their walls and our shields as affording greater protection than their whole suits of armor. When we are victorious we can take them prisoner, and when we are overpowered we can elude them. If we choose to retreat, we can conceal ourselves in swamps and mountains so inaccessible that we cannot be found or taken. **5d** Our opponents, however, can neither pursue anybody because of their heavy armor, nor yet flee. If they ever do slip away from us, they take refuge in their appointed camps, where they shut themselves up as in a trap.

5e "In other ways, too, they are vastly inferior to us. They cannot bear up under hunger, thirst, cold, or heat, as we can. They must have housing and clothing, kneaded bread and wine and oil, and if any of these things are lacking, they perish. For us, on the other hand, any grass or root serves as bread, the juice of any plant as oil, any water as wine, any tree as a house. **5f** Furthermore, this region is familiar to us and is our ally, but to them it is unknown and hostile. As for the rivers, we swim them naked, whereas they do not get across them easily even with boats. Let us, therefore, go against them trusting boldly to good fortune. Let us show them that they are hares and foxes trying to rule over dogs and wolves."

6a When she had finished speaking, she used a kind of divination, letting a rabbit out from her pocket of her dress. Since it ran on what they considered the auspicious side, the whole multitude shouted with pleasure.

Then Boudicca, raising her hand toward heaven said: **6b** "I thank thee, Andraste [goddess of victory], and call upon thee as woman speaking to woman; for I rule over no burden-bearing Egyptians as did Nitocris, nor over trafficking Assyrians as did Semiramis (for we have by now gained thus much learning from the Romans!), **6c** much less over the Romans themselves as did Messalina once and afterwards Agrippina and now Nero. He, though in name a man, is in fact a woman, as is proved by his singing, lyre-playing and beautification of his body. Nay, those over whom I rule are Britons, men that know not how to till the soil or ply a trade, but are well versed in the art of war and hold all things in common, even children and wives, so that the latter possess the same valor as the men. **6d** As the queen of such men and of such women, then, I pray thee for victory, preservation of life, and liberty against men insolent, unjust, insatiable, impious -- if, indeed, we ought to term those people men who bathe in warm water, eat artificial delicacies, drink unmixed wine, anoint themselves with myrrh, sleep on soft couches with boys for bedfellows -- boys past their prime, too. They are slaves to a lyre-player and a poor one, too. **6e** Let this Mistress Nero reign no longer over me or over you men; let her sing and lord it over the Romans, for they surely deserve to be the slaves of such a woman after having submitted to her so long. But for us, O goddess Andraste, be thou alone ever our leader."

7a Having finished an appeal to her people of this general tenor, Boudicca led her army against the Romans. It happened that they were without a leader, because their commander Paulinus had gone on an expedition to Mona, an island near Britain [the Isle of Man]. This enabled her to sack and plunder two Roman cities, and, as I have said, to wreak indescribable slaughter. **7b** Those who were taken captive by the Britons were subjected to every form of outrage. The worst and most bestial atrocity committed by their captors was the following. They hung up naked the noblest and most distinguished women and then cut off their breasts and sewed them to their mouths, in order to make the victims appear to be eating them; afterwards they impaled the women on sharp skewers run lengthwise through the entire body. **7c** All this they did to the accompaniment of sacrifices, banquets and wanton behavior, not only in all their other sacred places, but particularly in the grove of Andraste. This was their name for Victory, and they regarded her with most exceptional reverence.

8a Now it happened that Paulinus had brought Mona to terms, and so on learning of the disaster in Britain he at once set sail from Mona. However, he was not willing to risk a fight with the barbarians immediately, as he feared their numbers and their desperation. He wanted to postpone battle to a more convenient season, but as he grew short of food and the barbarians pressed relentlessly upon him, he was forced to engage them.

8b Boudicca, at the head of an army of about 230,000 men, rode in a chariot herself and assigned the others to their several stations. Paulinus could not extend his line the whole length of hers, for, even if the men had been drawn up only one deep, they would not have reached far enough, so inferior were they in numbers; **8c** nor, on the other hand, did he dare to join battle in a single compact force, for fear of being surrounded and cut to pieces. He therefore separated his army into three divisions, in order to fight at several points at one and the same time, and he made each of the divisions so strong that it could not easily be broken through.

9a While ordering and arranging his men he also exhorted them, saying : "Up, soldiers ! Up, Romans ! Show these evil wretches how far we surpass them even in the midst of bad luck. It would be shameful for you to lose the glory that you won by your valor such a short time ago. We ourselves and our fathers, with far fewer numbers than we have now, often have beaten far bigger armies. **9b** Do not fear their numbers or their spirit of rebellion, for their boldness rests on nothing more than rashness unaided by arms or training. Do not fear them for burning a couple of cities, for they did not capture them in battle: one city was betrayed and the other abandoned to them. Make them pay the proper penalty for these deeds now, and let them learn by actual experience the difference between us, whom they have wronged, and themselves."

10a After addressing these words to one division he came to another and said: "Now is the time, fellow-soldiers, for bravery and daring. For if you show yourselves brave men today, you will recover all that you have lost; if you overcome these foes, no one else will any longer withstand us. By one such battle you will secure your present possessions and stop future trouble; for everywhere even in other lands our soldiers will follow your example, and foes will be terror-stricken. **10b** Therefore, since you have it within your power either to rule all mankind without a fear, both the nations that your fathers left to you and those that you

yourselves have gained in addition, or else be deprived of them altogether, choose to be free, to rule, to live in wealth, and to enjoy prosperity."

11a After making an address of this sort to these men, he went on to the third division, and to them he said: "You have heard what outrages these damnable men have committed against us. You have even witnessed some of them. **11b** Choose, then, whether you wish to suffer the same treatment yourselves as our comrades have suffered and to be driven out of Britain entirely, or whether you will avenge those that have perished and at the same time furnish to the rest of mankind an example of inevitable severity toward the rebellious. **11c** For my part, I hope that victory will be ours; first, because the gods are our allies (for they almost always side with those who have been wronged) ; second, because of the courage that is our heritage, since we are Romans and have triumphed over all mankind by our valor; next, because of our experience (for we have defeated and subdued these very men who are now arrayed against us); and lastly, because of our prestige (for those with whom we are about to engage are not enemies, but our slaves, whom we conquered even when they were free and independent).

11d Yet if the outcome should prove contrary to our hope - for I will not shrink from mentioning even this possibility - it would be better for us to fall fighting bravely than to be captured and impaled, to look upon our own entrails cut from our bodies, to be spitted on red-hot skewers, to perish by being melted in boiling water - in a word, to suffer as though we had been thrown to lawless and impious wild beasts. **11e** Let us, therefore, either conquer them or die right here. Britain will be a noble monument for us, even though all the other Romans here should be driven out; for in any case our bodies shall for ever possess this land."

12a After addressing these and like words to them, he raised the signal for battle. Thereupon the armies approached each other, the barbarians with much shouting mingled with menacing battle-songs, but the Romans silently and in order until they came within a javelin's throw of the enemy. **12b** Then, while their foes were still advancing towards them at a walk, the Romans rushed forward at a signal and charged them at full speed, and when the clash came, easily broke through the opposing ranks. They were surrounded by the great numbers of the enemy, so they had to be fighting everywhere at once. **12c** The struggle took many forms. Light-armed troops exchanged missiles with light-armed, heavy armed were opposed to heavy-armed, cavalry clashed with cavalry, and against the chariots of the barbarians the Roman archers contended. The barbarians would charge the Romans with a rush of their chariots, knocking them helter-skelter, but, since they fought without breastplates, they would be repulsed by the arrows. **12d** Horseman would overthrow foot-soldier and foot-soldier strike down horseman. A group of Romans, forming in close order, would advance to meet the chariots, and others would be scattered by them. A band of Britons would come to close quarters with the archers and rout them, while others were content to dodge their shafts at a distance. All this was going on not at one spot only, but in all three divisions at once.

12e They fought for a long time, both armies being driven by the same zeal and daring, but finally, late in the day, the Romans prevailed. They slew many in battle beside the camp wagons and in the forest, and they captured many alive. Nevertheless, not a few made their escape and were preparing to fight again.

12f In the meantime, however, Boudicca fell sick and died. The Britons mourned her deeply and gave her a costly burial; but, feeling that now at last they were really defeated, they scattered to their homes. So much for affairs in Britain.