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TO THE EDGE OF THE WORLD: JULIUS CAESAR'S FIRST INVASION OF BRITAIN

By Isaac Copeland

It was the year 55 B. C. and Gaius Julius Caesar wanted to cross over the ocean to Britain. Britain was a land of myth and legend to the Romans. Caesar's biographers were careful to mention that he "was the first to launch a fleet upon the western ocean and to sail through the Atlantic sea carrying an army to wage war."¹ Pliny the Elder's measurement of Britain at 800 miles long and 300 miles wide was still a century away, and for all the Romans knew, it was a continent.² But despite all these myths, legends, and uncertainty, or maybe because of them, Caesar was determined to cross the Channel and invade Britain.

At first glance, Caesar's first campaign in Britain seemed a failure. He won no meaningful victories, and in several conflicts teetered on the brink of disaster. Despite his troubles in the field, Caesar spun the story of his invasion of Britannia into political capital. Caesar silenced his enemies in the Senate and captured the imaginations of the Roman populace. More importantly, he also

¹ Plutarch. *Lives: Caesar*, Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. (Loeb Classical Library Database 1919), xxiii.

² Pliny. *Natural History*, Translated by H. Rackham. (Loeb Classical Library Database 1938.), iv:103

learned three valuable lessons for his second invasion. First, Caesar learned a healthy respect for the English Channel and its storms. Second, he learned the necessity of cavalry to counter the Briton's chariots and to provide him intel. Lastly, he completely redesigned his fleet for an easier amphibious landing.

Before Caesar could fulfill his dream, he had unfinished business in Gaul. In 54 BC Caesar had ruthlessly fought off an incursion of Germans into Gaul, massacring many of them, and driving the rest back across the Rhine.³ Caesar's war on the Usipetes and the Teneteri German tribes was highly controversial, even in its own day, and led to Cato proposing that Caesar should be abandoned to the Germans as punishment.⁴ The two tribes had crossed the Rhine seeking asylum and protection in Gaul from the Suebi, a powerful tribe moving in from the east of Germany.⁵ Caesar had not granted them asylum in Gaul, "fearing the fickleness of the Gauls" and moved his armies to intercept the two

³ Julius Caesar, *The Gallic Wars*, tran. James J. O'Donnell, (Loeb Classical Library Database.) iv:12.

⁴ Adrian Goldworthy. *Caesar: Life of a Colossus*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 276. There was even a precedent for this. Caius Hostilius Mancius had been handed over to his enemies in 137 B.C. for surrendering to his enemies. However, it would be hard for Cato to push this precedent onto the case of Caesar. This practice was normally used to avoid unwanted treaties, which is what Caesar had done.

⁵ Caesar, iv:1

tribes.⁶ Caesar ordered his army to approach the German tribes while he negotiated an agreement with the Usipedetes and the Teneteri stipulating that they move across the Rhine and support another German tribe, the Ubii, against the Suebi.⁷ While Caesar continued to advance on the tribes' main camp, his Gallic cavalry was out foraging and crossed paths with the German cavalry. The meeting escalated into conflict. Caesar took this as an act of war and massacred the two tribes, pushing the remnant across the Rhine.⁸ Attacking a people after just making a treaty with them was taboo for the Romans, and this massacre turned much of the Senate against him.⁹ The Romans pursued the Germans across the Rhine and made a short punitive expedition into Germany.¹⁰ Caesar maintained that the Germans initiated the conflict, but some scholars, like Adrian Goldworthy, have cast doubt on this claim.¹¹

The battles against the Usipedetes and the Teneteri peoples ate up much of the summer campaigning season and there was not

⁶ Ibid, iv:5

⁷ Caesar, iv: 8.

⁸ Ibid, iv:12

⁹ Goldworthy, 276.

¹⁰ Caesar, iv:16. Caesar's expedition across the Rhine is often mentioned in the same context as the invasions of Britain. Caesar was the first Roman to cross the Rhine and the first Roman to sail on the Ocean and set foot on Britain. Dio Cassius. *Roman History*, Translated by Earnest Cary, Herbert B. Foster. (Loeb Classical Library Database, 1914), xxxix:50.

¹¹ Goldworthy, 274.

much time left before winter made it impossible to invade Britain.¹²

Caesar's excuse for the invasion was that the Britons had supplied his foes in "almost all the Gallic campaigns."¹³ This excuse has drawn some small debate from scholars. Richard Hingley and T. Rice Holmes, two of the preeminent scholars on Caesar's British Campaigns, argue that this may have been true for the Veneti, a sea faring people Caesar had conquered in the previous year.¹⁴ Both these scholars base their arguments off of Strabo, who claimed the Veneti had formed a coalition to keep Caesar from entering Britain.¹⁵ Goldsworthy points out that in all his campaigns and even in the war with the Veneti, Caesar never once mentioned Britons prior to book IV. Only a passing comment, almost a footnote, connects the Britons to the Gallic tribes across

¹² Caesar, iv:20

¹³ Ibid, iv:20.

¹⁴ Richard Hingley, *Conquering the Ocean: The Roman Invasion of Britain. Ancient Warfare and Civilization*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press), 2022, 19. T. Rice Holmes.. *Ancient Britain and the Invasions of Julius Caesar*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1936,) 302.

¹⁵ Strabo. *Geography, Volume II: Books 3-5*. Translated by Horace Leonard Jones. Loeb Classical Library 50. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923. "Of the Belgae, there are, first, the Veneti who fought the naval battle with Caesar; for they were already prepared to hinder his voyage to Britain, since they were using the emporium there."

the channel.¹⁶ To say that the Britons had supplied all his foes was pure hyperbole.

In both the incident with the Usipedes and the Tenetteri and also in Caesar's invasion of Britain, Caesar was careful to give some justification for the conflict, no matter how small or dubious. The Romans, almost paradoxically, had a strong tradition of belief in Just War theory. The best definition of Roman Just War theory is found in the writings of Cicero, specifically in *On Duties*, and the third book of *The Republic*.¹⁷ While some scholars dismiss Cicero's writings on Just War as being simply theoretical and not actually practiced, Riggsby argues that this is not the case. Riggsby claims that since Roman morality was primarily concerned with action and not motive, what constitutes a Just War is different from modern conceptions.¹⁸ Actions revealed good or bad character, and therefore, justification did not necessarily depend on motivation.¹⁹ If the action had a net good outcome, the reasons behind it were less important. In modern conceptions, going back to Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, motivation matters, whereas, in Ancient Rome, the end justifies the motivations that led to it.

¹⁶ Goldworthy, 269

¹⁷ Andrew M. Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul and Rome: War in Words*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 158.

¹⁸ Riggsby, 166.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 167.

Whether such notions and theories were a serious part of Caesar's decision-making process is a moot point. The idea of Just War was prevalent enough that Caesar felt obligated to record some action on his enemy's part to justify his wars against them. Just War theory may not have affected Caesar's decision-making on the field, but ideas of Just War were certainly influential in how Caesar framed his war to the public. Otherwise, he would not have bothered with excuses for his invasions.

Caesar's justification is also a reminder that his book's purpose was self-promotion, and an invasion of Britain put him in a great light. The invasion was a statement to his allies, his enemies, and the populace of Rome. To the populace of Rome, and partly in his own mind, Caesar put himself in the same league as Alexander or Hercules, going beyond the edge of the world.²⁰ Britain would be his Garden of the Hesperides or his India. To his enemies in the Senate, the invasion was an excuse to stay in command of his legions and to win some favor after the campaign with the Usipedes and the Tenetteri.²¹ In the Senate, Caesar's enemy Strabo was clamoring for action against him, and Caesar

²⁰ Hingley, 18.

²¹ Peter Salway, *Roman Britain*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 25.

needed some good news from his campaign before he had to return to Italy for the winter.²² To his allies it was an attempt to keep in the public eye, as he was the farthest from Rome of the still young Triumvirate. The winter before, in 56 B.C., Caesar had gone down to meet with Pompey and Crassus, and he needed some wins to prove his worth to the new alliance.²³ Britain was a golden opportunity to gain public favor, and Caesar jumped at it.

Caesar admitted that it was too late in the season to do any actual campaigning. His aim was primarily information gathering and reconnaissance.²⁴ Caesar inquired with local Gallic traders but could obtain little to no information on the Britons from the Gauls. He knew neither the size of the island, the population, nor, most immediately, good harbors.²⁵ According to Dio Cassius, some Roman scholars thought that Britain was another continent rather than an island.²⁶ It is highly likely, however, that the traders Caesar had questioned knew something of Britain. There had been trade and migration between Gaul and Britain, and there were, in fact, Belgic peoples living in Britain when Rome invaded.²⁷ Caesar

²² Goldworthy, 276.

²³ Goldworthy, 262.

²⁴ Caesar, iv:20.

²⁵ Ibid, iv:20

²⁶ Cassius, xxxix:50.

²⁷ Salway, 11.

seemed to believe the report from the Gauls and sent out his own subordinates to get the lay of the land.

Caesar sent Gaius Volusenus, a tribune and cavalry commander, to “spy out everything and to return to him at once.”²⁸ Volusenus set out in a single boat and spent five days sailing up the coastline. Volusenus did not disembark and only observed from his ship. While Volusenus was away scouting, news had come to the Britons that Rome was preparing an invasion. Some Briton noblemen came to Caesar’s camp in the land of the Morini promising hostages and allegiance to Rome.²⁹ Caesar sent Commius with them, a Gaul who Caesar deemed loyal and who seemed to have some influence with the Britons, to make alliances with the Britons and lay the groundwork for Caesar's invasion. Caesar overestimated Commius’ influence with the Britons, as he was captured and put in chains almost immediately on his arrival. Intelligence also came from Gaul about unrest from Morini, one of the many Gallic groups under Caesar’s control. Caesar did not wish to delay the invasion of Britain and had no time to prosecute

²⁸ Caesar, iv:21.

²⁹ At the time Caesar was camped near what would become Calais. The Morini occupied the land in the Lowlands of what would become Belgium and the Netherlands.

a campaign against the Morini.³⁰ Caesar divided his forces to deal with the unrest and prepared two legions for the invasion, the Tenth and the Seventh Legions, in 80 transports built for the campaign against the Veneti the year before.³¹

It was uncharacteristic of Caesar to act on so little intelligence. He knew nothing of the numbers of his enemies, the lay of the land, alliances, or anything beyond a harbor.³² Caesar normally took military intelligence very seriously and on several occasions previously, in campaigns against the Gauls, refused to move his troops due to information or lack thereof.³³ Frontinus in his treatise *Stratagems* uses Caesar as an example for knowledge and use of terrain in enemy territory, as well as using intelligence about religious customs against his enemies.³⁴ Due to this lack of intelligence, Caesar was forced to make the first invasion a reconnaissance mission in preparation for another campaign. He might also have been feeling the heat from the Senate to make a big move before the end of the campaigning season. Ezov

³⁰ Caesar, iv:22

³¹ Ibid, iv:22

³² Amiram Ezov, "The 'Missing Dimension' of C. Julius Caesar." *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 45, No. (1996): 69.

³³ Ezov, 68.

³⁴ Frontinus. *Stratagems*. Translated by C. E. Bennett, Mary B. McElwain. (Loeb Classical Library Database, 1925), ii:1:16, ii:2:3.

proposed that Caesar cared more for information on the sea and harbors than on the military strength of his enemies and so moved to invade despite a lack of other vital information.³⁵

Upon arriving off the shores of Britain, in the fourth hour of the day, Caesar was confronted with “armed forces of the enemy displayed on all the cliffs.”³⁶ Dio Cassius wrote that the Britons were forewarned of Caesar’s arrival and had secured the coast against him.³⁷ Caesar weighed anchor outside of the range of the troops on the cliffs and waited for his straggling fleet to catch up. Upon their arrival Caesar called a council of his officers to discuss the situation and find a solution. At this council, Caesar shared the findings of Volusenus and he resolved to sail up the shore to find better anchorage.³⁸ Caesar led his ships “around a certain projecting headland” and attempted a landing.³⁹

The most hotly debated part of Caesar's first invasion was his choice of landing sites. Even among Roman writers, Caesar’s handling of the amphibious landing was identified as a mistake.⁴⁰

³⁵ Ezov, 69.

³⁶ Caesar, iv:23.

³⁷ Cassius, xxxix:51.

³⁸ Caesar, iv:23

³⁹ Cassius xxxix:51

⁴⁰ Cassius, xxxix:51. Suetonius. *The Twelve Caesars*. Translated by Robert Graves and Michael Grant Rev. ed. / ed. (Loeb Classical Library Database 1979), xxv.

Modern scholars, such as Holmes and Fitzpatrick, question where he landed and why he did not choose the same harbor as Claudius' invasion. It had been assumed that Caesar's initial landfall was at Dover, but this has been contested. Several other sites, such as Sussex, have been proposed. The Sussex theory never gained much traction, largely due to Dio Cassius' mention of a "projecting headland," which scholars, led by Holmes, identify as the South Headland, which is north of Dover. Additionally, there is archeological evidence of an iron age port at Dover.⁴¹ The traditional landing place is set between Walmer and Deal.⁴² Fitzpatrick proposed a landing sight further up the coast at Ebbsfleet, closer to where later Roman invasions landed.⁴³

Along the cliffs, the Briton army began to follow Caesar's fleet as the Romans sailed seven miles up the coast. The chariots and cavalry of the Britons kept pace with the Roman convoy, but the foot troops, understandably, fell behind.⁴⁴ The Britons who lined the cliff tops were part of a tribal Iron Age celtic society.

⁴¹ Holmes, 306.

⁴² Holmes, 311. This location has rarely been challenged, and Holmes' defense of the location has been adequate to quell most scholars' doubts.

⁴³ Andrew P Fitzpatrick. "Caesar's Landing Sites in Britain and Gaul in 55 and 54 BC: Critical Places, Natural Places." In *Julius Caesar's Battle for Gaul: New Archaeological Perspectives*, edited by Andrew P. Fitzpatrick and Colin Haselgrove, 135–58. Oxbow Books, 2019.

⁴⁴ Caesar, iv:24.

Little is known about the Britons before Caesar, and most of the evidence is archeological. Britain has been an island marked by invasions, and this was the case even before the Romans arrived. There is evidence of three main invasions or migrations of peoples from the mainland into Britain.⁴⁵ The first group, known as the “A” group arrived in the Bronze Age and appear to be a part of the Hallstatt culture. They were known for building hill forts, a practice which was still alive and well in the time of Caesar.⁴⁶ The first round of hill fort building is thought to have taken place at the invasion of the “B” group, a La Tene influenced people. The La Tene were distinguished by their ornate metal work, and judging by the ornate work on the horse harnesses that have been found, it is probable that the “B” group introduced chariots to Briton warfare.⁴⁷ Salway is less sure about the invasion of the “B” group, but the “C” group was much more definite. The “C” group was a La Tene III culture, and was identified by Caesar as being

⁴⁵ John Wacher, *Roman Britain*. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1978), 15.

⁴⁶ Salway, 9. Salway also lays out an alternative theory to the “invasion hypothesis”, the “importation hypothesis.” This theory states that these differences in culture were not brought by invading people groups but merely imported to the island via trade. Salway, as well as Wacher, both favor the “invasion hypothesis.”

⁴⁷ Wacher, 16.

Belgaic.⁴⁸ The Belgae were newly arrived in Britain at the time of Caesar's invasion and had not pushed far north or completely laid out their political system.⁴⁹

More pertinent to Caesar's invasion was the use of chariots by the Briton coalition that had been organized to meet him. Chariot warfare was an important part of warfare for the Britons and proved to be troublesome for Caesar. Chariot warfare had gone out of practice on the Continent for a while, and by the 1st Century B.C. chariot warfare could only be found in Britain.⁵⁰ Throughout Gaul and against the Germans, Caesar had encountered hit and run tactics when fighting the Celts. This strategy proved the most effective way to deal with the Romans, and Caesar often found himself faced with a retreating enemy he could not pursue.⁵¹ Caesar was very impressed with the Briton's chariots and credited the charioteers with daily practice and the ability "to gallop their teams down the steepest of slopes without loss of control, to check and turn them in a moment, to run along the pole, stand on the yoke, and then, quick as lightning, to dart back into the chariot."⁵²

⁴⁸ Salway, 11.

⁴⁹ Wachter, 22.

⁵⁰ Carl Meredith Bradley, "The British War Chariot: A Case for Indirect Warfare." *Journal of Military History* 73, no. 4 (October 2009): 1078. Bradley, 1077.

⁵² Caesar, iv:33.

The beauty of the chariots was that they afforded the Britons an extremely mobile infantry. Caesar claimed that the Britons would use their chariot as taxis for ground troops, moving their fighting force to the weak point in the line and then quickly retreating when things soured.⁵³ They also could stand at a distance and throw spears at the enemy without engaging.⁵⁴

The Romans faced stiff opposition to their landing. The chariots and light cavalry had shadowed them the entire way down the coast and held the beach against them. To add to this, the Roman ships could not draw close to the shore, as their hulls were too deep and the water too shallow.⁵⁵ The Romans were weighed down in their heavy armor and had to withstand the buffet of the waves, while the Britons waited in the shallows with full use of their limbs.⁵⁶⁵⁷ The Romans were faring badly. They were inexperienced in amphibious assaults and the hit and run tactics of the Britons were proving effective. The Roman legions could not form up in their ranks. Caesar remarked that “our troops did not

⁵³ Ibid, iv:33.

⁵⁴ This is also the same method of chariot warfare described in Homer, with chariots being used as taxis to move the heroes to and from the battle. Riggsby argues that this similarity added to the already considerable mystique surrounding Britain.

⁵⁵ Caesar, iv:24.

⁵⁶ Ibid, iv:24.

press on with the same fire and force as they were accustomed to show in land engagements.”⁵⁷

Upon observing this, Caesar commanded that one of the warships sail close to the end of the Briton line and fire upon them with “slings, arrows, and artillery.”⁵⁸ This caused some distress to the Briton troops, as they were unfamiliar with “the shape of the ships, the motion of the oars, and the unfamiliar type of the artillery.”⁵⁹ The projectile fire on their flanks caused the Britons to falter, but the main body of Caesar’s force still could not make any headway. Seeing the stalemate, an unnamed standard bearer from the Tenth Legion, bearing his eagle, leapt from the boat and cried “Leap down, soldiers, unless you wish to betray your eagle to the enemy; it shall be told that I at any rate did my duty to my country and my general.”⁶⁰ This brave standard bearer inspired many of Caesar’s men back on the ships to leap into the water. However, the uncertain footing and disorganization in the water made it hard to advance. Caesar utilized small transport ships to reinforce the weak places in his line, and the Romans began to win some ground.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Caesar, iv:24.

⁵⁸ Ibid, iv:24.

⁵⁹ Ibid, iv:25.

⁶⁰ Caesar, iv:25

⁶¹ Ibid, iv:26

“The moment our men stood firm on dry land,” Caesar wrote, “they charged with all their comrades close behind, and put the enemy to rout...” Once the Romans gained the beach they were able to form up and begin to do what they did best. Cassius simply states: “and disembarking there in the shoals, conquered those who joined battle with him and gained a footing on dry land.”⁶²

The actions of the unnamed standard bearer of the Tenth Legion became famous. Goldworthy does note that it is strange that the standard bearer was not named. He offers two explanations for this. The first is that Caesar tended to celebrate the whole of the Tenth Legion, rather than the individuals in it.⁶³ Another reason may be that this man was not a nobleman, and so did not warrant mention by name as no one outside Caesars armies would recognize him.⁶⁴

After winning the beachhead and putting the Britons to flight, the Romans ran into the problem that plagued them for the rest of their stay in Britain. They had no cavalry to pursue the fleeing Britons. The ships bearing the cavalry had been caught in a storm and driven off into the North Sea, keeping them from ever landing in Britain.⁶⁵ Even though the Romans had proven their

⁶² Cassius, xxxix:51.

⁶³ Goldworthy, 282.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 282.

⁶⁵ Caesar, iv:22.

effectiveness in pitched battle against very steep odds, they could not capitalize on the victory. They managed to win the beach, but the damage they could have wrought against the Britons was severely lessened.

The lack of cavalry not only limited the Romans' ability to capitalize on their victories but also left them practically blind. Without his cavalry patrolling the countryside, Caesar had no way of knowing what the Britons were planning against him.

After Caesar's success on the beach, Briton delegates came to him with terms for peace. Dio Cassius identifies some of these delegates as from the Morini.⁶⁶ Following the coalition was the previously captured Commius along with 30 cavalymen who had gone with him. The Britons promised to send hostages, and "do what he commanded."⁶⁷ The Britons pleaded ignorance and that it had been a group decision that they had merely gone along with the capture of Commius. Holmes suggests that perhaps the resistance to Caesar had come from the local tribes and that these tribes were from further inland.⁶⁸ Caesar shrewdly pointed out that the Britons had already sent delegates to him in Gaul promising

⁶⁶ Cassius, xxxix:51.

⁶⁷ Caesar, iv:27

⁶⁸ Holmes, 319.

allegiance and hostages, yet he had been attacked upon his arrival.⁷⁰ The Britons had no answer to this. Caesar had no real way of enforcing any threat due to a lack of cavalry, and so he agreed to forgive them that trespass and demanded hostages.⁶⁹ In the next few days the men who had fought against Caesar returned to their farms, and other chieftains from across the area had also come to sue for peace with Caesar. Salway comments, “it looked as if Caesar had achieved his ends with a single battle.”⁷⁰

The next day, the fourth since the day of the infantry landing, the lost cavalry attempted to land and disembark. When they were within sight of Caesar and the men on the shore, a storm came up and scattered the fleet. “Some,” Caesar wrote, “were carried back to the selfsame port whence they had started, others were driven away, with great peril to themselves, to the lower, that is, to the more westerly, part of the island.”⁷¹ Holmes notes that Caesar was careful to retell that in the scattering of his cavalry he did not lose a single man, a testament to the seamanship of the Gauls.⁷² During the same storm, Caesar’s transports were also

⁶⁹ Ibid, iv:27.

⁷⁰ Salway, 29.

⁷¹ Caesar, iv:28.

⁷² Holmes, 318.

damaged, some beyond repair. Caesar was stranded in Britain without cavalry, ships, or food.⁷³

This marked a turning point in Caesar's 55 B.C. campaign. Within Caesar's own camp, the hostage chieftains held a council. They knew just as well as Caesar the position the Romans were in. Also, the Roman camp looked small, so they assumed there were not many Romans in Britain.⁷⁴ In his book, Caesar corrected this notion, explaining that the camp was small due to the lack of supplies, not lack of men.⁷⁵ The Briton chieftains judged that if they could cut off Caesar from returning to Gaul for the winter, no more help could come from Gaul due to the winter storms, and their troubles with the Romans would be over.⁷⁶ The chieftains renewed their vows to each other and slipped out of the camp, recalling their men from the fields in secret.⁷⁷

Due to his lack of cavalry, Caesar had no way of knowing that the Britons were amassing a large coalition to get rid of him. He did know something was up, as his hostages had escaped and no more were coming in.⁷⁸ Caesar was no fool, and he recognized

⁷³ Caesar, iv:29.

⁷⁴ Caesar, iv:30.

⁷⁵ Ibid, iv:30.

⁷⁶ Ibid, iv:30.

⁷⁷ Salway, 29.

⁷⁸ Caesar, iv:31.

that his position had changed. He knew his position was perilous, and knew that his enemies could figure this out as well.⁷⁹⁸¹

After the night of disaster that destroyed his ships, there was a lull, and Caesar prepared for the Britons to attack him. He sent his men out to gather as much corn as they could in preparation for a prolonged stay.⁸⁰ Of equal importance was repairing the ships. Twelve of the eighty ships were deemed unsalvageable and those working on repairing the ships used both wood and bronze from these ships for the repair of the others.⁸¹ Caesar recorded that the legionnaires set about their work “zealously”, and understandably so, as the ships were their lifeline home.⁸² In some of the ships still seaworthy, Caesar sent for help from the continent.⁸³

Caesar sent the Seventh Legion out to cut grain from the fields surrounding the camp. All during this time, the local populace had been coming and going through the Roman camp. Additionally, there were still farmers in their fields cutting grain

⁷⁹ Ibid, iv:31.

⁸⁰ Holmes, 320. The Romans used the word “corn” for generic grain. It is not referring to maize from North America.

⁸¹ Caesar, iv:31.

⁸² Caesar, iv:31.

⁸³ Ibid, iv:31.

alongside the Romans.⁸⁴ Coupled with the fact that Caesar and the Romans had no inkling about the plans of the Britons, the Seventh Legion was complacent in their foraging. Holmes holds the view that the commanding officer neglected to send out scouts, and did not leave half the men armed in preparation for attack.⁸⁵ Caesar wrote that the men had “set aside their arms” to cut the grain.⁸⁶

Out of a nearby wood, waiting Briton chariots and cavalry charged the unsuspecting Romans, catching them completely by surprise.⁸⁷ Dio states that the Romans were all destroyed “except for a few.”⁸⁸ Caesar did not comment on the casualties. From the camp, a guard saw more than usual dust from the direction of the battle and informed Caesar. Caesar recognized what was going on at once and summoned all the cohorts out foraging to join him in giving them relief.⁸⁹

At the battlefield it was pure chaos. The chariots drove all over the field, and the charioteers wreaked havoc with the Romans, hurling spears from the moving chariots, or disembarking to prey

⁸⁴ Holmes, 321.

⁸⁵ Holmes, 321. In a footnote on this section, Holmes admits that this view is not held universally. While it is clear that the Romans had set aside their weapons, it is not explicit that they neglected to scout the area.

⁸⁶ Caesar, iv:32.

⁸⁷ Ibid, iv:33.

⁸⁸ Cassius, xxxix:52.

⁸⁹ Caesar, iv:33.

upon a vulnerable Roman before leaping back onto the chariot to retreat before aid could come.⁹⁰ Caesar reported that the sight of the war horses and the clatter and noise of the wheels terrified the Romans, further adding to the chaos.⁹¹ Strabo adds that the Britons were taller than the Romans, towering over even the tallest Romans, adding to the terror of these barbarians.⁹² The Romans could not form up and they were slaughtered as they rushed to grab their weapons. Caesar recorded that he arrived just in the nick of time to save his troops, but Cassius's statement is damning.

By the time Caesar got there the cohorts were practically destroyed.⁹³ It is notable that he went himself to deal with the problem and put himself in danger to save his men, and his arrival did cause the advance of the Britons to halt. What was left of his men were able to retrieve their gear and rejoin Caesar's forces.⁹⁴ Caesar then "deemed the moment unsuitable for provoking and engaging in a combat; he therefore stood to his own ground and, after a brief interval, led the legions back to camp."⁹⁵ In other words, after regaining what was left of his men, Caesar beat a

⁹⁰ Holmes 321.

⁹¹ Caesar, iv:33.

⁹² Strabo, iv:V:2.

⁹³ Cassius, xxxix:52.

⁹⁴ Caesar, iv:34.

⁹⁵ Ibid, iv:34.

hasty retreat for the camp and the safety of the combined Roman forces.

After this episode another storm set in, giving the Romans respite to lick their wounds and the Britons time to recall all their men from the fields. Caesar noted that the men that had hitherto been working the fields near the camp now disappeared.⁹⁶ In all likelihood they were part of the Britons' ruse, and, having succeeded, were now recalled to join the main force. Their plan worked and the Romans had taken some losses. Cassius relates that the reason for the attack on the foragers was that the Britons feared attacking the fortified Roman camp.⁹⁷ After the days of rain were up, the Britons had overcome their fear of the Roman position and attacked the Romans in force at their fortifications.⁹⁸

The Britons made repeated attacks against the camp. They could not defeat the Romans in pitched battle before the Roman's encampment, but neither could the Romans pursue their enemies and turn a repulsion into a victory.⁹⁹ Caesar, tired of these constant needling battles, decided to change tactics. Instead of simply

⁹⁶ Ibid, iv:34.

⁹⁷ Cassius, iv:xxxix,52.

⁹⁸ Caesar, iv:34.

⁹⁹ Ibid, iv:35

defending the camp, when the Britons came to attack, he arrayed all of his two legions, the Seventh and the Tenth, on the field. The Britons were unable to face such a heavy onslaught from the full might of Caesar's legions and began to flee. Caesar then sent out what little cavalry he had. Thirty men returned under Cassius and pursued the retreating Britons.¹⁰⁰ Inspired, Caesar's infantry also pursued the Britons "as far as their speed and strength enabled and slew not a few of them" and burned all the buildings and fields along the way.¹⁰¹ For the first and only time in this campaign, Caesar was able to truly capitalize on his victory in the field.

That very day, the Briton Chieftains sued for peace. Cassius says that Caesar did not want to accept their offers of peace, but winter was coming and Caesar was not equipped to stay the winter in Britain to insure they kept their promises.¹⁰² Caesar met with the delegates and demanded twice the hostages he had before and ordered that they be sent off to the continent behind him.¹⁰³ Only two tribes did so. Caesar ended his campaign with a victory against the Britons, an empty victory that won him few hostages and no territory, but a victory nonetheless. The equinox was approaching,

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, iv:35.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, iv:35.

¹⁰² Cassius, xxxix:53.

¹⁰³ Caesar, iv:36.

and Caesar did not want to risk his damaged fleet in winter storms. The next fair day, Caesar set sail back to Gaul, his appetite for British conquest dampened but not sated.¹⁰⁴

Even Caesar's return journey was fraught with trouble. Two of his ships were blown off course and had to land in a different port, north of Calais in what is modern day Belgium. The surrounding Morini, seeing an opportunity for some loot, surrounded the men on the beach.¹⁰⁵ The Morini told them to lay down their arms and surrender, but the Romans formed a square and fought them off. The noise attracted 6,000 more Morini and the Romans became hard pressed.¹⁰⁶ They held out for four hours before the full force of the Roman cavalry, numbering some 8,000, came to their rescue. At the sound of the approaching Roman Cavalry, the Morini fled. This led to an eventual conflict with the Morini that Caesar delegated to his right-hand man, Titus Labienus.¹⁰⁷

When news came to Rome, there was much rejoicing. A period of celebration, prayers, and thanksgiving was ordained by

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, iv:36.

¹⁰⁵ Caesar, iv:38.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, iv:37.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, iv:38.

the Senate, which at the time was filled with Caesar's enemies.¹⁰⁸ Caesar had done what no other Roman had done. He sailed on the Great Atlantic, set foot on the Island of Britain, and returned victorious.¹⁰⁹ He had gained little outside of honor, but to him it was enough.¹¹⁰ He had stayed in the public eye and had rebutted accusations against him by Cato and others in the Senate through his actions. Caesar returned to Italy to soak up the praise, and more importantly, refresh his legions for his full invasion the next year, including the promising young officer, Quintus Cicero, son of the famous orator, Marcus Tullius Cicero.¹¹¹ Alongside these new troops and officers, Caesar also won some favor with the elder Cicero.¹¹² Caesar had left instructions with his legions to build new

¹⁰⁸ Holmes, 325.

¹⁰⁹ Somewhat victorious at least

¹¹⁰ Cassius, xxxix:53 "From Britain he had won nothing for himself or for the state except the glory of having conducted an expedition against its inhabitants; but on this he prided himself greatly and the Romans at home likewise magnified it to a remarkable degree."

¹¹³ Goldsworthy, 285.

¹¹¹ Holmes, 328-329. Quintus Cicero proved invaluable during the Gallic uprisings the year following Caesar's second invasion of Britain. He held out against a superior force and alerted Caesar to the uprising.

¹¹² Cicero, as quoted in: Roger, Tomlin. *Britannia Romana : Roman Inscriptions and Roman Britain*. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2018), 1.

boats for the second invasion, so he could invade promptly with his new force.¹¹³

Caesar's invasions captured the imaginations of later Romans and inform the successful conquest of Britain a century later. Tacitus grants Julius Caesar the discovery of Britain for the Roman people, and the establishment of a legacy down through Augustus and Tiberius that Claudius brought to fruition.¹¹⁴ Tacitus also claimed, rather dubiously, to have met a man who had fought against Julius Caesar in the first invasion.¹¹⁵ Despite near disaster, the invasion of Britain was seen as a brilliant move by a daring commander to the Romans.¹¹⁶ The invasion, while a tactical disaster, was a political triumph, eliminating all thought of abandoning Caesar to the Germans or Gauls.¹¹⁷ This expedition gave Caesar the intelligence he needed for his next invasion in the following year, 53 BC. The first invasion is a prologue of the things to come in the second invasion.

¹¹³ Caesar, v:1.

¹¹⁴ Tacitus. *Agricola*. Translated by M. Hutton, W. Peterson. Revised by R. M. Ogilvie, E. H. Warmington, Michael Winterbottom. (Loeb Classical Library Database, 1914,) xiii.

¹¹⁵ Tacitus. *Dialogue on Oratory*. Translated by M. Hutton, W. Peterson. Revised by R. M. Ogilvie, E. H. Warmington, Michael Winterbottom. (Loeb Classical Library Database 1914,) xvii.

¹¹⁶ Hingley, 13.

¹¹⁷ Goldworthy, 285.

Caesar was more prepared for his second invasion, which proved much more successful in terms of victories and the territory Caesar covered. Caesar had learned some valuable lessons about Britain. First, never underestimate the power of the ocean. It was two storms that truly ruined Caesar's first invasion. The first caused the cavalry to be swept off course in the first crossing, and the second more disastrous storm prevented his cavalry from arriving a second time and damaged his ships.¹¹⁸ This in turn emboldened the Britons to attack him and changed the tide of the war.

The second lesson was the importance of his cavalry. Caesar was almost certainly aware of the importance of his cavalry, but the invasion of Britain truly drove home the necessity of his Gallic cavalry. Without his cavalry he had been unable to capitalize on any of his victories and truly crush the Britons.¹¹⁹ Even the presence of 30 horsemen was enough to force the Britons to sue for peace.¹²⁰ The second use of cavalry was in gathering intelligence. Caesar had no way of knowing what the Britons were doing and if they were moving against him. It was only quick thinking and some shrewd guesses on Caesar's part that kept

¹¹⁸ Caesar, iv:28

¹¹⁹ Ibid, iv:35.

¹²⁰ Ibid, iv:35.

him from total disaster. On two occasions he had been able to guess the Britons' plans correctly. He was able to correctly surmise that the Britons had allied against him after his fleet was damaged and to deduce that the dust meant a battle was taking place. Thus he was able to save some of the cohorts of the Seventh Legion.¹²¹ Additionally, he had found a better place to land for the next invasion, further up the coast.¹²²

Finally he knew that he needed a new fleet. The ships he had taken to Britain the first time were damaged, and ill suited for making landings and disembarking troops on hostile shores. Caesar did not want a repeat of the first battle of the first invasion when he had to fight his way up to the beach from the water. He ordered 600 shallow hulled transports ships be made and tasked all his legions with their construction.¹²³ He now had a workable fleet to move his troops and easily disembark. In addition all his legions now had some experience with shipbuilding and could repair the ships if they were damaged.

Aside from the political clout he gained from his first expedition, these lessons were the most valuable thing Caesar got from his first invasion. By the time Caesar returned in the early

¹²¹ Caesar, iv:31, iv:32.

¹²² Holmes, 335.

¹²³ Caesar, v:1.

months of 54 B.C. he was ready to mount his real invasion. He was prepared with the knowledge learned in his first attempt and had fresh troops to commit to his purpose. He had all of Rome behind him, and was as popular as ever. Armed with these things, Caesar once again prepared to invade Britain.

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