

# The site of Boudica's last battle: a comment

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THE EDITOR HAS asked me to comment on the interesting and stimulating article by Nicholas Fuentes on Boudica in the Autumn issue, which poses a fresh solution to the scenario of the Revolt. Before being carried away by these new and imaginative ideas, the evidence of Tacitus and an assessment of the problems facing Suetonius should be considered.

There is, in the first place, a misunderstanding about the estate of Prasutagus, who as a client-king had been a dependant of his patron, the Emperor. When a client ruler died it was understood that the Emperor would have regarded the kingdom and its wealth as his own property, but it was normal to make generous provision for members of the royal house. Prasutagus in his will was telling the Emperor that he hoped he would provide for his wife and family, and, in the normal course of events, this would probably have been the case. Why then did the Procurator behave in such a high-handed manner? The answer must be in the need to draw up a balance sheet of all the royal wealth in his capacity as chief financial officer. But this may not have been fully understood by Boudica and her household, or possibly Catus saw an opportunity for personal gain by the adroit manipulation of the figures. He may have seen even better opportunities in exploiting any Icenian protest. The acts of brutality which followed were those which were only afflicted on the enemies of Rome; had a royal guard raised a hand against one of the Procurator's men, it could have been judged an act of war, with the inevitable consequences. It is impossible ever to know what happened, but it most probably followed this pattern. The withdrawal of loans to the British chiefs, apparently by both the Emperor and by Seneca probably took place at an earlier date, in my opinion, following the disasters on the western frontier after the death of Ostorius Scapula. But it continued to rankle, and was, as Dio says, a major factor in the support Boudica received from the outraged Britons. The small force sent to Camulodunum by Catus probably consisted of *beneficarii* and other old soldiers on his and the Governor's staff.

The British planning of the revolt was excellent and although the Roman authorities must have had early intimation, no action was apparently taken until the rebels gathered to attack Camulodunum. It

may have been the British intention to arrest the advance of the Roman army on the Druids' sanctuary on Anglesey, if so, it failed as Paullinus was not to be deterred from his main target, so he ordered the nearest legion to deal with the revolt. This was *Legio IX* at Longthorpe and, although some men were probably on out-post duty, it is hardly likely that the legion would have been split into three parts, as suggested<sup>1</sup>. The extent and character of the force can only be guessed at, but 2000 legionaries were later sent from Germany which allowed *Legio IX* to make up its losses. It is possible that some legionaries escaped from the ambush.

The rebels spent some time sacking and looting the *colonia*, a more disciplined force would have gone straight to Londinium. But the delay allowed time for Paullinus to reach the city to find out for himself the true state of affairs. Had he had his army with him he would then surely have advanced on Camulodunum, but he had no large force with him, or anywhere near, as Tacitus makes clear<sup>2</sup>. He was therefore forced to abandon Londinium to its awful fate, and moved with such speed as he could to join his main force at the predetermined rendezvous, which must have been somewhere along Watling Street, to the north-west of Verulamium.

In order to bring the main Roman force near London, Nicholas Fuentes has to turn the sack of Verulamium into a local affair, but in doing so has exposed a serious error. It has been a common mistake to regard the Catuvellauni as one of the main enemies of Rome because Cassivellaunus had been their king. But Caesar tells us no such thing, he does not even state that he was a king, only that he belonged to a tribe north of the Thames about eighty miles from the sea. If this is anywhere near the truth and taken from Caesar's landing place, it would place the tribe in the Lea Valley, but figures of all kinds given by classical historians are notoriously unreliable. As Professor Hawkes has suggested in his stimulating paper on this subject<sup>3</sup>, Caesar was probably operating from Trinovantian territory and

1. Newton-on-Trent probably belongs to the troubles of Car-timandua at the time of Didius Gallus and a legionary detachment may well still have been here.
2. XLV, 33 *infrequentia militis*.
3. C. F. C. Hawkes, 'Britain and Julius Caesar', *Proc. Brit. Acad.* 73 (1977), 170-1.

what may be of significance is the name, unique in Britain, of Caesaromagus (Chelmsford) as Caesar's base camp. The River Can may even have been the western boundary of the Trinovantes.

On these grounds, it is more likely that the stronghold of Cassivellaunus was in the Epping Forest area. The selection of Wheathampstead is due only to the persuasive argument of Wheeler, rather than any solid evidence. The most significant fact is that the Catuvellauni, far from being enemies of Rome were the people to receive the major portion of trade after Caesar's invasion. This is very clear from the rich Welwyn graves and the presence of a Roman trading depot at Skeleton Green near Braughing<sup>4</sup>. The tribe must have been from the start one of Caesar's allies, although he does not include their name in his list. The hostility between the Catuvellauni and the Trinovantes came later when, presumably by a dynastic alliance, the power centre was moved from the Lea Valley to the Colne under Tasciovanus or Cunobelinus. The Catuvellauni must have welcomed the Romans in A.D. 43 and rendered them valuable assistance for their capital to have been singled out for the only British settlement to be made a *municipium*. Even if the evidence from Tacitus is rejected, there is now ample confirmation from excavations of the early rapid urban development. It is not therefore surprising that it was a target for the Boudican anti-Roman rebels. The destruction was thorough, but no traces of human remains have been found which indicates that all or most of the Britons escaped to the safety of Roman military protection.

It would have been extremely unwise for Paullinus to have brought the army so far south. The rendezvous must have surely been in the military zone for the army to receive supplies and rein-

4. Clive Partridge, 'Skeleton Green', *Brit. Monograph* 2 (1981), 351-6.

*Nicholas Fuentes writes:*

If I may make a few points in response to Dr. Webster's comments—

1. The plan of the excavation at Longthorpe (with the two sizes of barrack blocks) indicates that the fort could contain only four (more likely three) legionary cohorts and two auxiliary cohorts; indeed, Frere and St. Joseph estimate that the fort's maximum capacity was only 2800 men<sup>1</sup>. If Dr. Webster is right in believing that the 9th Legion was not split into three parts, then because Newton on Trent appears to have a smaller area than Longthorpe, it is still necessary to find a fort capable of accommodating at least six or seven legionary cohorts.

1. S. S. Frere and J. K. St. Joseph, 'The Roman Fortress at Longthorpe', *Britannia* 5 (1974) 35.

forcements, including *Legio* II from Exeter; but this unit would, in my view, have been pinned in its fortress by the Durotriges and southern Dobunni, probably with the help of the Dumnonii, now that more evidence of their hostility to Rome is emerging in their territory. Paullinus could afford to wait and rest his men after their long march from Chester, as Dio indicates. He also needed to find a suitable place to make his stand which would give him a tactical advantage, and to also block the British advance along Watling Street. Another problem may well have been the large number of refugees he had attracted, a good point made by Nicholas Fuentes. The site I have suggested at Mancetter may not be the right one, but it has all the requisites and an additional point in its favour discovered since this idea was first proposed. It is now known that this was the site of the fortress of *Legio* XIV before it moved to Wroxeter c. A.D. 56, and therefore would have been still under military control and probably occupied by an auxiliary garrison.

A point is made about destruction material from a pit at Staines having some significance. While not having the opportunity to study the evidence in detail, it would seem more likely to be the material from a demolition pit, following normal Roman practice with the transfer of a unit, and there is certainly evidence of a military establishment here at an early period.

We can all enjoy being armchair strategists and produce contradictory accounts of this episode and proof will always be difficult, if not impossible, to find. One has not only to weigh the scraps from Tacitus and Dio with the growing amount of archaeological evidence, much of which, alas, has only an indirect bearing, but also to understand the pragmatic Roman military mind and which we imagine to have been the character of Suetonius Paullinus.

2. Dr. Webster asks why Paulinus, if he had his army with him (as I would maintain), did not advance directly on Camulodunum. I offer one simple explanation: by the time Paulinus had arrived in the area of High Cross where the first road to Camulodunum branches off Watling Street, he would have heard of the sack of the *colonia* and the rout of Cerialis, and therefore decided to march to the aid of the living at Londinium (High Cross is some 50 miles (80km) from Longthorpe and 85 miles (136km) from Londinium). Alternatively, and in line with my postulated sequence of events, because Londinium lies on the shortest route from Exeter to Camulodunum, Paulinus may have decided to pick up the expected reinforcement of the 2nd Legion there before marching to meet the rebels.

On Tacitus' phrase "*infrequentia militis*", the context has Paulinus in Londinium assessing the military situation in order to evaluate whether the town could be used as a *sedes bello* (operational base). However, because of his *infrequentia militis* and with the fate of Cerialis in mind, he decides to retire. If Paulinus had only a cavalry detachment (say, 500 men) with him, then the possibility of holding an unfortified town against a rebel horde would surely never have even been worthy of debate. On the other hand, if Paulinus has marched with the bulk of his Anglesey expeditionary force, then the possibility of making a stand until the 2nd Legion arrived from Exeter would be an obvious subject for consideration.

3. As Dr Webster points out, the tribal background of Cassivellaunus is not clear, but it is difficult to envisage what other tribe in the area could have such a formidable king (or war lord); according to Caesar he is certainly not Trinovantian. Interestingly enough Hawkes (in the article which Dr. Webster quotes) describes Cassivellaunus' tribe as the one called "in subsequent record the Catuvellauni" (p.77).

4. I cannot accept the argument that in the post-Caesarian period the high level of Roman trade with the Catuvellauni necessarily indicates that they were not former enemies of Rome – consider, for example, the modern parallel of Germany and Japan, or in ancient times how three years after the end of the First Punic War Rome gave permission to merchants to export everything Carthage required when the latter was immersed in a revolt of its discharged mercenaries<sup>2</sup>. Trade and past enmity often go hand in hand.

5. "The Catuvellauni must have welcomed the Romans in A.D. 43" but in fact it is more probable, as Dr. Webster has written elsewhere, that "The invasion of Britain .... (was) in response to the sudden rise to power of the anti-Roman faction of the royal house of the Catuvellauni"<sup>3</sup>; this faction was headed by the late king Cunobelin's two sons, Caratacus and Togodumnus. If the Catuvellauni were (still) friendly with the Romans in A.D. 60, why does Tacitus state that Paulinus "preceded to Londinium through the midst of the enemy"<sup>4</sup>.

Dr. Webster also states that "the Catuvellauni must have.... rendered (the Romans) valuable assist-

ance for their capital to have been singled out for the only British Settlement to have been made a *municipium*." More specifically, it is the only town known to have the rank of *municipium* from the whole of Britain and we know that only because Tacitus happens to mention its status when describing its destruction (assuming that the reference is technically correct and that it is not used anachronistically). There were undoubtedly other *municipia* in Britain: in Spain, Vespasian is known to have effectively elevated its some 400 towns to the status of *municipia* through the award of the *Ius Italicum* to all free people<sup>5</sup>. In Africa (including Tripolitania and Numidia), there were only 15 *municipia* at the beginning of the reign of Augustus<sup>6</sup>, but inscriptions found show that six emperors from Trajan to Septimius Severus promoted at least a further 25 to 35 to this status<sup>7</sup>; in Britain, five other towns have been listed as possible *municipia*<sup>8</sup>. It has been suggested that the early rapid urban development of Verulamium may have occurred as a result of the philo-Roman Adminius (the third son of Cunobelin) being installed there after the invasion in order to institute the process of Romanisation<sup>9</sup>. This scenario, or a similar one, would not however necessarily change the feelings of the bulk of the area's population towards the Romans (and towards their own once-exiled rich nobles).

6. If it was "extremely unwise for Paulinus to have brought his army so far south", would it not be equally unwise for him to detach himself for the long and hazardous ride to Londinium "through the midst of the enemy".

7. On the evidence from Staines, the large timber building which I mentioned as having been destroyed by fire in the pre-Flavian period, in fact lay outside the ditched area of the postulated military post. The excavator considered (and still does consider) that there was "probably a military detachment and depot maintained at Staines until A.D. 60"<sup>10</sup>. The burnt daub and ashes at Staines were from a ditch (as mentioned) and not from a pit.

The search for the pattern of the Boudiccan campaign is great fun – one point on which I do agree with Dr. Webster – and finding even reasonable proof of the actual site of the final battle will certainly be difficult. Nevertheless I intend to continue my quest.

2. Polybius *Histories* 1.83.10.

3. G. Webster *Rome against Caractacus* (1981) 13.

4. Tacitus *Annals* 14.33.1.

5. Pliny *Natural History* 3.30.

6. *Ibid* 5.29.

7. J. Gasco *La Politique Municipale de l'Empire Romain en Afrique Proconsulaire de Trajan à Septime-Sévère* (1972) cartes I-VI.

8. J. Wachter *The Towns of Roman Britain* (1974) 19.

9. *Ibid* 203.