

ART. VII – *Roman Britain and “The Year of the Four Emperors”*

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THE year A.D. 69, was a momentous one for Rome, the empire and for Roman Britain: Rome and the empire were subjected to the traumatic ravages of a type of civil war which, it had been thought, the reforms of Augustus Caesar had consigned to the past.¹ In Britain, the uncertainties of that civil war not only provoked dissension amongst the representatives in the province of Rome’s governing class, but also provided an opportunity for Rome’s enemies to dismantle the relationship which had kept the tribal territory of the Brigantes as an essentially “neutral” entity on the northern flank of the military advance.²

There are, however, uncertainties in the accounts which survive from classical authors (especially Tacitus)³ and it is the purpose of the present paper to re-examine the period with a view to seeking clarification of the issues between individual Romans and of their ability to handle the “crisis” that developed in northern England during A.D. 69.

Britain, in the 60s, was in a “period of transition”: the Boudiccan rebellion had created a need to restore mutual confidence and, to this end, it appears that Nero’s government appointed to Britain provincial governors whose chief purpose was to calm bruised sensibilities rather than to advance the conquest significantly. Publius Petronius Turpilianus (61-63) and Marcus Trebellius Maximus (63-69) appear to have been well-suited to the carrying out of such a policy.⁴ At the same time, the 60s found Nero increasingly “embattled”; the murders of his mother, Agrippina, and of his wife, Octavia, seriously damaged his popularity,⁵ and, in 62, he lost (by death) the services of his principal adviser, Afranius Burrus.⁶ The “Great Fire” of Rome in 64 and the emperor’s subsequent grandiose rebuilding plans (especially his new palace, the *Domus Aurea*) damaged him still further; thus, in 65,⁷ he found himself the target of a conspiracy centred around the *nobilis*, Gaius Calpurnius Piso. These events heightened Nero’s fears and suspicions of the senatorial class and led him, it has been suggested,⁸ to appoint, to senior posts, men whose “social credentials” might make them less attractive as rivals for his position. In 67, the emperor left Rome on what appears to have been something of an “escapist enterprise” – a tour of Greece, during which he was happy to bask in the popularity engendered by his artistic activities.⁹ That it was, however, a “fool’s paradise”, is shown by the fact that, on his return, he soon found himself faced, in March of A.D. 68, by a rebellion in Gaul, headed by Gaius Julius Vindex, who was soon joined in his enterprise by the future emperor, Servius Sulpicius Galba.¹⁰ By early June, Nero was dead, and Galba the new emperor.

Through much of this gathering gloom for Nero, his governor in Britain was Marcus Trebellius Maximus, who had shared a consulship with the emperor’s adviser, the philosopher and financier, Seneca, as long before as A.D. 56. Subsequently, he acted, with Quintus Volusius Saturninus and Titus Sextius Africanus as a census-officer (*ensor*) in the Gallic provinces;¹¹ evidently, Trebellius’ two colleagues spent so much effort trying to rival each other and disdaining him

that, ironically, he took the limelight from them. Of his earlier career little is known, although he is mentioned by Josephus¹² as a senator in A.D. 41. A Marcus Trebellius is given as a legionary *legatus* in the east in A.D. 36¹³ under Lucius Vitellius, father of the future emperor. Traditionally, this Trebellius has been taken as the father of Nero's governor of Britain, but it is conceivable that the "Tiberian" and "Neronian" Trebellii were one and the same.¹⁴ In this case, the career will have represented the very slow progression of a man evidently regarded as of mediocre calibre. If this identification is correct, then Trebellius Maximus would probably have been in his late sixties when made governor of Britain. He is registered as an *Arvalis* in 72 and 75, and was *magister* in the earlier year.¹⁵ Syme has conjectured that he may have received this distinction from Galba;¹⁶ at any rate, his origin was probably from Toulouse (*Tolosa*) in *Gallia Narbonensis*, as was that of the Flavian general, Antonius Primus, who previously had been a partisan successively of Galba and Otho.

Basically, the difficulties in Britain in the late 60s stemmed in large part from the bad relationship between Trebellius Maximus and Roscius Coelius, *legatus* of legion XX, which is said by Tacitus to have been long-standing, but which the onset of civil war fanned into vigorous life.¹⁷ Trebellius accused Roscius Coelius of "sedition" and "disrespect to his superior", whilst the latter countered with an accusation of despoiling the legions of Britain and leaving them poor. It is hardly possible now to get to the meaning of these "charges", nor is it easy to see how political sympathies developed during A.D. 68-69. Certainly, both men appear by the spring/summer of 69 to have been partisans of Vitellius.

Roscius Coelius did not receive a consulate until A.D. 81; a twelve-year interval between the posts of legionary *legatus* and consul would seem to betoken disfavour in Flavian eyes, although this might have accrued from the legate's support for Vitellius. Additionally, disfavour might have attached to an overlong adherence to Nero on Roscius' part, whilst age and some circumstantial evidence might place Trebellius in the camp of Galba. The elderly emperor was notoriously intolerant not just of enemies, but also of those who had simply failed to support him;¹⁸ yet, if Syme is right, Galba actually enhanced the status of Trebellius Maximus. If Roscius Coelius was initially a supporter of Nero, he may well have voiced his objections to what he perceived as a wavering attitude to that emperor on Trebellius' part in the crucial early months of A.D. 68. We should perhaps remember Tacitus' later observation that Nero was defeated "more by reports and rumours than by force of arms".¹⁹ As with the "wavering attitude" of Verginius Rufus in Germany, the equivocation of Trebellius Maximus in Britain (if such it was) did not in fact mean the loss to Nero of the province's legionary support.²⁰ Trebellius' charge of "disrespect" is not in the circumstances surprising, and might be regarded as a reasonable description of the behaviour of Roscius Coelius towards a man who was his senior by, perhaps, thirty years.

The "charges" levelled by Roscius Coelius are harder to pinpoint; how could Trebellius be described as having despoiled and impoverished the legions, unless it is a reference to reining in their rapacity and denying them the opportunities of lucrative campaigns? Only one specific incident might apply – the removal in A.D. 67 of legion XIV *Gemina Martia Victrix* by Nero for his proposed expedition to the Caspian Gates; this, after all, would have reduced the British garrison by twenty-five

percent. Perhaps Trebellius was seen by some to have been weak in his “defence” of Britain’s military interests.

It is evident that relations between Trebellius Maximus and Roscius Coelius and the legions broke down in a catastrophic way, though there remains some confusion over the precise course of events. It seems reasonable, however, to assume that such a “stand-off” could not have lasted for very long. It may be that in the spring of A.D. 68 there was a confrontation from which Trebellius Maximus fled and hid, though the sense of Tacitus would be that on that occasion the governor remained in the province.²¹ The “rising” of Vitellius at the end of A.D. 68, which was followed swiftly by Galba’s death (in January, A.D. 69), precipitated a further crisis in the province. Trebellius may in these circumstances have simply transferred his support to Galba’s murderer and successor, Marcus Salvius Otho, whilst Roscius Coelius and his legionaries may be surmised to have ardently embraced the cause of Vitellius, who had been elevated and was supported by the legions of the Rhine.

This would certainly have served to deepen the crisis in relations between Trebellius Maximus and Roscius Coelius. In this case, Trebellius’ flight²² from the province may have occurred in the wake of Otho’s suicide in April 69. Vitellius spared his life, perhaps in recognition of Trebellius’ earlier association with his father, but (understandably) did not give him any especial consideration, in contrast with his treatment of Cluvius Rufus, who had “left” his Spanish province at about the same time. Instead, Vitellius brought Trebellius’ dismal tenure of Britain to a formal end, replacing him with one of his “courtiers”, the northern Italian *consularis*, Marcus Vettius Bolanus. In the “interregnum”, however, Roscius Coelius and the other legionary *legati* were left to run the province.

We may be sure that the victorious Flavian side would have found it easier to stomach the elderly Trebellius Maximus, who had “deserted” Nero and embraced successively the causes of Galba and Otho, and “run” to Vitellius only as a last resort than they would the ardent Vitellian, Roscius Coelius.

We may, in short, summarise this part of the episode: Trebellius Maximus was an elderly and none-too-distinguished ex-consul, who was appointed to Britain in the aftermath of Boudicca’s rebellion. He appears to have lacked recent military experience, though his time as a *censitor* in Gaul may well have proved useful in the composing of difficulties in Britain. His relations with the military in the province were poor, and made worse by the advent, perhaps in the late 60s, of Roscius Coelius as *legatus* of legion XX; their feud was probably fuelled by the lack of military initiatives in the province at the time and, in 67, by the loss from the garrison of legion XIV. The outbreak of civil war in the spring of A.D. 68 made matters worse; indeed, Trebellius may have been one of those governors who, when “sounded out”²³ by Julius Vindex late in 67, either did nothing or even indicated sympathy with his enterprise. It certainly seems possible that, by April 68, Trebellius was at least a tacit supporter of Galba, provoking a crisis with the legionary commanders who remained loyal to Nero. The advent of Vitellius and the death of Galba (late 68/early 69) finally brought matters to breaking point in Britain, leading to Trebellius’ flight and replacement by Vettius Bolanus.

Although there is no precise indication of the chronology, it appears that so far dissident groups within Britain had not taken direct advantage of the embarrassing rifts amongst provincial officers. However, relations between the two Brigantian

leaders, Cartimandua and Venutius, had not been stable for some time,²⁴ and occasional temporary intervention by Roman troops had been necessary to guarantee the integrity of the client-kingdom.²⁵ According to Tacitus,²⁶ the catalyst to further trouble amongst the Brigantian leaders in A.D. 69 was the uncertainty that existed in the British legions over their loyalty to either Vitellius or Vespasian, who had declared himself a candidate for the throne at the beginning of July.²⁷

The new governor, Vettius Bolanus, is not portrayed by Tacitus²⁸ as “the man for a crisis”, yet, we should bear in mind that he was appointed in very testing circumstances in 69, and held the post until succeeded in 71 by Vespasian’s kinsman, Quintus Petillius Cerialis.²⁹ Vettius Bolanus had served – evidently with distinction – as a legionary *legatus* with Domitius Corbulo in Syria in 62.³⁰ He proceeded, perhaps after the proconsulship of Macedonia,³¹ to a suffect consulship, probably in the autumn of 66. Nothing further is heard of him during the remainder of Nero’s reign, and the fact that he survived the brief principate of Galba must suggest either that he embraced Galba’s cause or, at least, did not support Nero’s with too great an alacrity; indeed, it may have been the enforced suicide of his former commander, Corbulo, in 67, that turned Vettius Bolanus against Nero. In 69, as an unemployed *consularis* in the entourage of Vitellius, he may have seemed an ideal choice to replace Trebellius Maximus, particularly since Vitellius was, by the spring of 69, counting on military support from Britain in his forthcoming defence of his throne:³² even before Otho’s death, he evidently had some 8,000 men from Britain in his army.³³

The state of the legionary army in Britain during A.D. 69 is far from clear; in addition to the 8,000 troops serving with Vitellius, legion XIV, which had been removed from Britain by Nero in 67, had not been returned and was fighting with Otho at Bedriacum in April. Although the legion returned temporarily, perhaps with Bolanus,³⁴ after the battle, given its frustrated anti-Vitellian sentiments its presence in Britain was hardly conducive to harmony and good order; indeed, it was soon the subject of approaches by emissaries from the Flavian side³⁵, as was Vespasian’s “old legion”, II *Augusta*. It also seems clear that substantial numbers of troops from Britain fought for Vitellius against the Flavians during the autumn of 69.³⁶ Whatever his own personal ambiguity between the causes of Vitellius and Vespasian, Vettius Bolanus must have realised that, whichever side he supported, it would in all probability gravely impair the security of his province.³⁷ Roscius Coelius, we may assume from his long-delayed consulship (A.D. 81), remained a partisan of Vitellius until the end – until he was replaced, in 70, as *legatus* of legion XX, by the loyal Flavian, Cnaeus Julius Agricola.

Vettius Bolanus had probably, by the late summer of 69, come down on the Flavian side; the favour, which he was later to enjoy in Flavian circles, would not be consistent with an overlong delay in reaching his decision. His earlier fears, however, regarding the security of his province were soon shown to have been thoroughly justified, as the stability of the Brigantian client-kingdom broke down yet again.³⁸

The outcome on this occasion was much more serious than before: “Venutius got the kingdom”, wrote Tacitus, “whilst we were left with a war”. In other words, the Roman dependence on the neutrality of the Brigantes was a matter of the past, and their policy would now have to look to conquest and a substantial extension of the area directly administered – and with an army that can hardly yet have been

composed after recent dissensions. So, to what extent was Vettius Bolanus able to cope with this crisis?

That the territory of the Brigantes was ceded to Venutius, at least temporarily, is clear; but Bolanus must have moved to effect the rescue of Cartimandua.³⁹ It is not known for certain where Cartimandua had tried to defend herself against her former husband. It is always assumed that her main strength lay in and to the east of the Pennines;⁴⁰ Stanwick and Barwick-in-Elmet have been canvassed as centres of her power.⁴¹ The main Roman bases for this operation will have been at Lincoln, and western sites, such as Little Chester and Wroxeter. There is, indeed, some indication that the Roman “front line” was edging northwards in the southern Pennines and Cheshire during the 60s.⁴² A vexillation-fortress had been established as far north as Rossington Bridge (close to Barwick-in-Elmet), and a base had perhaps been established at Chester to facilitate the movement of troops by sea up the west coast.⁴³ Recent excavations at Kirkham⁴⁴ (on the estuary of the river Ribble) have revealed there a complexity of camps, watchtowers and forts; further, a similarly complex picture at Ribchester⁴⁵ may point to the planned use of the Ribble/Aire corridor as an “escape-route” for Cartimandua, who subsequently disappeared from history.

How far Bolanus pursued Venutius is less clear, although his task presumably became somewhat easier in 70, as the overall political situation became less fraught.⁴⁶ As Eric Birley observed long ago, the information given by the poet, Papinius Statius, on these matters, should be taken seriously, since it is hardly credible that he would, after so short a time, have been able to engage in a substantial traducing of the truth.⁴⁷

It is not unreasonable to suppose that Venutius may have had his “chief base” at Clifton Dykes (near Penrith), in the territory that was later to be Romanised as the *civitas* of the Carvetii.⁴⁸ Since Venutius was supported by allies “from elsewhere”, it also seems reasonable to suggest that his “escape-route” from the Romans will have taken him north of the later line of Hadrian’s Wall, and into Scotland. It has been shown⁴⁹ that there is perfectly sound evidence that, during his governorship, Petillius Cerialis penetrated Scotland – perhaps as far as the river Tay. But Cerialis did not become governor until A.D. 71, and his arrival at Carlisle appears to be dated to 72;⁵⁰ the pursuit of Venutius could hardly have been delayed as long as that.

Against Tacitus’ clear implication of inadequacy and inactivity on the part of Vettius Bolanus we have, as we have seen, to place the evidence of the Domitianic poet, Statius, writing an exhortation for Bolanus’ son, Vettius Crispinus. Amongst the achievements of Bolanus which are cited by Statius⁵¹ are references to Caledonia, fort- and watchtower-construction, dedication of victory-trophies, including one taken from a British king. Although the language is generalised, it is at least conceivable that Statius was indicating that it was Bolanus who defeated Venutius (or, perhaps, one of his allies) in Caledonia, an area properly taken as situated just to the north of the later line of the Antonine Wall.⁵² Further, the proposition that Scotland was penetrated prior to the governorship of Petillius Cerialis, although not proved, receives support from a reference in the *Natural History* of the Elder Pliny.⁵³ Nor is it necessary to interpret Tacitus’ reference⁵⁴ to Petillius Cerialis’ work amongst the Brigantes as leaving no role for Vettius Bolanus. It is reasonable to see the annexation of Brigantian territory as a process which spanned the period, A.D.

69/70-73/4; the immediate crisis had to be dealt with – a task which may have been lengthy and complex, particularly if Venutius’ supporters, after defeat, scattered over a wide area.⁵⁵ Further, the territory had to be reduced to order. It is clear, however, from the evident speed of Agricola’s northward sweep from A.D. 78 that there was probably little of military substance remaining to be done in northern England after the governorship of Cerialis, other perhaps than the introduction of suitable permanent arrangements for control.

Thus, whilst it can certainly be said that there is evidence with which to augment and correct Tacitus’ “damning with faint praise” of Vettius Bolanus, and whilst it appears reasonable to assert that Bolanus played a positive role in the process of conquering the Brigantes, it remains difficult to be certain of the precise nature of his contribution.

After his governorship, it would appear that Bolanus was highly regarded in the Flavian leadership: he became a patrician in A.D. 73/74,⁵⁶ and proconsul of Asia in 76, ten years after his consulship.⁵⁷ How long Bolanus lived on is unclear, but the likely dating of Statius’ poem to Vettius Crispinus⁵⁸ would suggest that he may have died at approximately the same time as Agricola – that is, in the early 90s.

One further point may be raised: A. R. Birley⁵⁹ suggested that the Quintus Petillius Rufus, who was consul with the emperor, Domitian, in A.D. 83 may in fact have been Quintus Petillius Cerialis Caesius Rufus, the former governor of Britain and (probably) brother-in-law of Domitian; as consul in 83, this man may have been involved with the emperor in the making of the decision to withdraw Agricola from Britain – which could help to account for Tacitus’ very obvious antipathy towards Cerialis. It might be added that the reaching of such an important decision could have involved other “elder statesmen”, particularly one such as Vettius Bolanus with his relatively recent experience of conditions in the northern part of the province. This could in its turn explain why Tacitus – to say the least – was less than enthusiastic in his *Life of Agricola* in his comments about a man who appears to have deserved better from posterity’s judgement.

In all, therefore, the tensions associated with the civil war may have circumscribed the Romans’ room for manoeuvre in Britain, and caused confusion and circumspection on the parts of the two governors, Trebellius Maximus and Vettius Bolanus; but these tensions clearly did not altogether preclude a Roman response to the “Brigantian crisis” of A.D. 69; indeed, Vettius Bolanus may have made a contribution far more significant than that allowed to him by Cornelius Tacitus.

Notes and References

¹ Tacitus, *Histories* I. 4, 2.

² Tacitus, *Histories* III. 45.

³ For example, inconsistencies regarding Trebellius Maximus (*Histories* I.60 and *Life of Agricola* 16, 3-4).

⁴ *Life of Agricola* 16, 2-3.

⁵ *Annals* XIV. 1-13 and 60-64.

⁶ *Annals* XIV. 51-52.

⁷ *Annals* XV. 48-74.

⁸ G. E. F. Chilver, “The Army in Politics, A.D. 68-70”, *Journal of Roman Studies* XLVII (1957), 29-35; Plutarch, *Life of Galba* 3, 3.

- ⁹ Dio Cassius LXII. 9ff.
- ¹⁰ D. C. A. Shotter, “A Timetable for the ‘Bellum Neronis’”, *Historia* XXIV (1975), 59-74.
- ¹¹ *Annals* XIV. 46, 2; for the career of Trebellius Maximus, see A. R. Birley, *The Fasti of Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1981), 59-62.
- ¹² Josephus, *Ant. Jud.* XIX. 2, 3.
- ¹³ *Annals* VI. 41, 1.
- ¹⁴ R. Syme, *Some Arval Brethren* (Oxford, 1980), 13n.
- ¹⁵ *CIL* VI. 2053.
- ¹⁶ R. Syme, *op. cit.*, 13.
- ¹⁷ *Histories* I. 60.
- ¹⁸ *Histories* I. 6-7.
- ¹⁹ *Histories* I. 98, 2.
- ²⁰ D. C. A. Shotter, “Tacitus and Verginius Rufus”, *Class. Quart.* XVII (1967), 370-381.
- ²¹ *Life of Agricola* 16, 4.
- ²² *Histories* II. 65, 2.
- ²³ Plutarch, *Life of Galba* 4, 2; Dio Cassius LXIII. 22, 3-6.
- ²⁴ D. C. A. Shotter, “Rome and the Brigantes: Early Hostilities”, *CW2*, xciv, 21-34.
- ²⁵ *Annals* XII. 31-40; D. C. A. Shotter, “The Roman Conquest of the North-west”, *CW2*, c, 33-53 (esp. 33-38); “Chester: The Evidence of Roman Coin-loss”, *Chester Arch. Journal*, LXXV (1999), 33-50 (esp. 39-41).
- ²⁶ *Histories* III. 44.
- ²⁷ *Histories* II. 79.
- ²⁸ *Life of Agricola* 8,1; for his career, see A. R. Birley, *The Fasti of Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1981), 62-65.
- ²⁹ See A.R. Birley, “Petillius Cerialis and the Conquest of Brigantia”, *Britannia* IV (1973), 179-190; D. C. A. Shotter, “Petillius Cerialis in Northern Britain”, *Northern History*, XXXVI (2000), 189-198. For the nature of the relationship between Cerialis and Vespasian, see G. B. Townend, “Some Flavian Connections”, *Journal of Roman Studies* LI (1961), 54-62.
- ³⁰ *Annals* XV. 3, 1; Statius *Silvae* V. 2, 34-41.
- ³¹ For the possible proconsulship of Macedonia, see A. R. Birley, *The Fasti of Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1981), 63.
- ³² *Histories* II. 97, 1.
- ³³ *Histories* II. 57, 1.
- ³⁴ *Histories* II. 66, 1.
- ³⁵ *Histories* II. 86, 4 and III. 44.
- ³⁶ Troops from all three British legions are said to have been fighting for Vitellius, though it is unclear how far these were additional to the original 8,000 (*Histories* II. 97, 1; 100, 1; III. 1, 2; 22, 2; IV. 46, 2); the true state of the British garrison is thus hard to ascertain.
- ³⁷ *Histories* II. 97, 1.
- ³⁸ *Histories* III. 45.
- ³⁹ *Histories* III. 45, 2.
- ⁴⁰ I. A. Richmond, ‘Queen Cartimandua’, *Journal of Roman Studies* XLIV (1954), 43-52.
- ⁴¹ See P. Turnbull, “Stanwick in the Northern Iron Age”, *Durham Arch. Journal*, I (1984), 41-49; P. Carrington, “The Roman Advance into the North-western Midlands”, *Chester Arch. Journal*, LXVIII (1985), 5-22.
- ⁴² See Carrington, *op. cit.*
- ⁴³ See D. C. A. Shotter in *CW2*, c, 33-38.
- ⁴⁴ C. L. E. Howard-Davis and K. M. Buxton, *Roman Forts in the Fylde: Dowbridge, Kirkham 1994* (Lancaster, 2000).
- ⁴⁵ K. M. Buxton and C. L. E. Howard-Davis, *Bremetenacum: Excavations at Roman Ribchester, 1980, 1989-90* (Lancaster, 2000).
- ⁴⁶ *Life of Agricola* 7, 3.
- ⁴⁷ E. B. Birley, *Roman Britain and the Roman Army* (Kendal, 1953), 13-15.
- ⁴⁸ N. J. Higham and G. D. B. Jones, *The Carvetii* (Stroud, 1985), 10-11.
- ⁴⁹ D. C. A. Shotter in *Northern History* XXXVI (2000), 189-198.
- ⁵⁰ M. R. McCarthy, *Carlisle: History and Guide* (Stroud, 1993), 2-3.
- ⁵¹ Statius *Silvae* V. 2, 140-9.

⁵² E. B. Birley, *op.cit.*, 14.

⁵³ Pliny, *Natural History* IV.102.

⁵⁴ *Life of Agricola* 17, 1.

⁵⁵ Note, for example, the suggestion that some may have escaped across the Irish Sea (B. Raftery, *Celtic Ireland: The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age* (London, 1994), 200-3).

⁵⁶ Statius *Silvae* V. 2, 28.

⁵⁷ Statius *Silvae* V. 2, 56-8 and A. R. Birley, *The Fasti of Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1981), 65 and note 19.

⁵⁸ A. R. Birley, *The Fasti of Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1981), 65.

⁵⁹ In *Britannia* IV (1973), 186-7.