

## Britain in the Roman Poets.

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THE Roman poets saw Britain through a haze of distance and ignorance, and thought of it with a vague feeling of discomfort and fear.

The ocean was to the Romans no highway of commerce, no link between nations, but the "oceanus dissociabilis." "Oak and triple brass," says Horace, "were about the heart of him who first exposed to its fury his fragile barque, and saw unmoved the swimming monsters and the seething sea."

Nequiquam deus abscedit  
Prudens Oceano dissociabili  
Terras, si tamen impiae,  
Non tangenda rates transiliunt uada.<sup>1</sup>

(In vain did the god in his providence sever the lands by the estranging ocean, if, in spite of this, the impious ships bound lightly over the waters, which should not have been touched.)

Beyond the ocean that marked the limit of the Roman world—an ocean unknown and stormy and unstudded by islands—were the "aequorei Brittani,"<sup>2</sup> "severed from the world."

Et penitus toto diuisos orbe Britannos.<sup>3</sup>

Britain is constantly spoken of as being situated in another world (alio . . . in orbe Britannos).<sup>4</sup> It seems as

1. *Odes*, I., 3, 21.

2. *Ovid. Met.* xv., 75.

3. *Verg. Ecl.*, i., 66.

4. *Claudian in II. Cons. Stil.*, iii., 148.

though there still remained in men's minds the awe and superstition felt for the "Ocean" of early antiquity, that fabulous stream which encircled the world.

It was almost sacrilege to cross it; besides the Romans were bad sailors, and the waves were not the only terror, real or imaginary, of the British seas, of the

Beluosus qui remotis  
Obstrepat Oceanus Britannis.<sup>5</sup>

(The monster haunted ocean which roars against the shores of distant Britain.)

A hundred years later the size of the British whale had almost passed into a proverb.

Et cuncta exsuperans patrimonia census  
Quanto delphinis ballaena Britannica maior.<sup>6</sup>

(And estates as much larger than all other fortunes as the British whale is larger than a dolphin.)

The inhabitants were no less formidable than the storms and creatures of the ocean.

Visam Britannos hospitibus feros  
Et laetum equino sanguine Concanum.<sup>7</sup>

(I shall visit the Britons fierce towards strangers and the Concani who delight in horses' blood.)

One wonders what kind of reception the Romans expected. When we remember Tacitus' account<sup>8</sup> of the human sacrifices of the Druids, we are not surprised to see the Britons coupled with the bloodthirsty Concani. The Irish seem to have had an even worse reputation. Strabo says that the inhabitants of "Ierne" were more

5. Hor. *Odes* IV., 14, 47.

6. *Juv.* x., 14.

7. Hor. *Odes*, III., iv., 33.

8. *Annals* iv., 30, and see Lucan, *Phars* i., 44, for a description of the rites and religion of the Druids.

savage than the Britons, feeding on human flesh, and enormous eaters.<sup>9</sup>

The Britons dyed themselves blue<sup>10</sup> or green<sup>11</sup> with woad. The cultured Cynthia has one thing in common with savage Britons. Propertius loquitur,

Nunc etiam infectos demens imitare Britannos,  
Ludis et externo tincta nitore caput.<sup>12</sup>

(And now you even imitate in your folly the dyed Britons, and play the coquette with an artificial brightness on your hair.)

The Romans had good reason to remember the wild appearance and desperate resistance of the painted Britons in their painted cars.<sup>13</sup> But the poets give no idea of the extraordinary skill and success with which they managed them.<sup>14</sup> We hear nothing in Cæsar of the scythed chariots mentioned by Silius Italicus.

Caerulus haud aliter, cum dimicat, incola Thules  
Agmina falcigero circumuenit arta couinno.<sup>15</sup>

(Just in the same way, when he fights, the dweller in Thule surrounds with his scythed chariot the close-thronged ranks.)

The climate of the island was terrible to the Romans. It was a chilly land of storm and mist,<sup>16</sup> "a land of uncleared forests with a climate which was as yet unmitigated by the organised labours of mankind. . . . The fallen timber obstructed the stream, the rivers were squandered in the reedy morasses, and only the downs and the hilltops rose above the perpetual tracts of wood."<sup>17</sup>

9. Strabo, i., 4, 5.

10. "Caeruleis Britannis," Martial xi., 53.

11. "Virides Britanni," Ovid, *Amores*, II., xvi., 39.

12. Prop. III., ix., 23.

13. "Picto Britannia curru" (Prop. V., 7, 4), (II. xviii. 1).

14. Cæs. *B.G.* iv. 33, and v. 16.

15. Punic. 17, 416.

16. Tac, *Agr.* 12, 3.

17. Elton's *Origins of Eng. Hist.*, page 217, cf. p. 2, *supra*.

In any case the Romans hated service in the distant dependencies of the empire. It meant hard work and comparatively little plunder. And the Britons were no despicable foes. We know, for example, that the Brigantes again and again beat back the Imperial legions.<sup>18</sup> The Imperial poets do not dwell on these incidents. Juvenal merely mentions the campaigns against the Brigantes as an example of long and misplaced toil with tardy and inadequate reward.

Dirae Maurorum attegias, castella Brigantum  
 Ut locupletem aquilam tibi sexagesimus annus  
 Adferat.<sup>19</sup>

(Pull down the huts of the Moors and the forts of the Brigantes, that your 60th year may bring you the lucrative post of Senior Centurion.)

There was dull work to be done, too, in keeping back the forces of nature, in making roads and clearing forests. While the Romans were draining and making causeways across the morasses, the Britons were content to ride gaily in their coracles over the flooded estuaries and inlets.

Primum cana salix madefacto uimine paruam  
 Texitur in puppim caesaque inducta iuueno,  
 Vectoris patiens tumidum superemicat amnem.  
 Sic Venetus stagnante Pado, fusoque Britannus  
 Nauigat Oceano.<sup>20</sup>

(First the damp withes of a silver willow are woven to form a little boat, and, covered with a bullock's hide, at the will of the man in it, the boat leaps out over the swollen stream. So do the Veneti sail when the Po overflows its banks, and the Britons when the sea inundates the land.)

No wonder that such a country was looked on as a

18. Cf. p. 118 *supra*.

19. *Juv.* xiv., 196.

20. *Lucan Phars.* iv., 131.

place in which war and famine might suitably work off their energy.

Hic bellum lacrimosum, hic miseram famem  
 Pestemque a populo et principe Cæsare in  
 Persas atque Britannos  
 Vestra motus aget prece.<sup>21</sup>

(He moved by your prayer will turn tearful war and wretched hunger from the people and from Cæsar their leader, against the Persians and the Britons.)

But if the muses go with him, Horace will feel safe in the most desolate realms of the world.

Utcunque mecum uos eritis libens  
 Insanientem nauita Bosporum  
 Tentabo et urentes arenas  
 Litoris Assyrii uiator.  
 Visam Britannos hospitibus feros  
 Et laetum equino sanguine Concanum  
 Visam pharetratos Gelonos  
 Et Scythicum inuiolatus amnem.<sup>22</sup>

(Whosoever you are with me, willingly will I face by sea the raging Bosphorus, and by land the burning sands of the Assyrian shore. I shall visit the Britons hostile to strangers and the Concani who rejoice in horses' blood. I shall visit the quivered Geloni and the Scythian stream unharmed.)

Ovid finds Italy without his love as unpleasant as Britain or the Caucasus.

Non ego Paelignos uideor celebrare salubres,  
 Non ego natalem, rura paterna, locum,  
 Sed Scythicam Cilicasque feros uiridesque Britannos  
 Quaeque Prometheo saxa cruore rubent.<sup>23</sup>

(I seem no longer to be haunting the healthy Pælgian land, and the country place where I was born and my father dwelt before me, but the lands of the Scythians and fierce Cilicians and green-stained Britons, and the rocks that are red with Prometheus' blood.)

21. Hor. *Ode* I., 21, 13.

22. Hor. *Odes* III., 4, 29—36

23. Ovid, *Am.* ii. 16, 37.

“Dira Britannorum agmina,”<sup>24</sup> “Horribile aequor ultimosque Britannos,”<sup>25</sup> “Trucis incola terrae,”<sup>26</sup> “Britannia inaccessis horrida litoribus.”<sup>27</sup> This is the refrain of Roman verse when Britain is the theme.

The material gains, even when the most ingenious methods of extortion were used, were not great enough to make up for the danger and discomfort of a stay in Britain. Besides why go to Britain when all that was really pleasant or useful could be enjoyed at Rome? First-rate oysters,<sup>28</sup> for example, and second-rate pearls,<sup>29</sup> and ornamental British chariots for fashionable use. (Propertius<sup>30</sup> begs Macaenas to stop his chariot near his tomb.) There was British basketwork for Roman ladies<sup>31</sup> and hunting dogs for the men.

Diuisa Britannia mittit

Veloces, nostrique orbis uenatibus aptos.<sup>32</sup>

(Britain from behind her barrier sends swift dogs suited to the hunting of our world.)

Pictured Britons<sup>33</sup> were inwoven in the curtain at the theatre, and real Britons really killed each other at the

24. Avienus, *Descr. orbis terrae*, l. 414 etc. On the questions raised by the passage in Avienus (quoted by Elton, pages 418—420) describing the *Estryrnides insula* and the *insula Albionum*, and the alleged early tin trade between Britain and Carthage, I must refer to Elton, pp. 19 ff.

25. Catullus XI.

26. Statius *Siluae* 2, 143.

27. Burmann's *Anth. Ep.* 91.

28. Rutupinoue edita fundo ostrea. Juv. iv., 141.

29. See reff. in Elton, p. 221.

30. *Esseda caelatis siste Britannia iugis.* Prop. ii., 1, 76.

31. Mart. xiv., 19.

32. Nemesianus, *Cyng.* 225. Elton quotes Claud. *Stil* iii., 301 (“Magnaue taurorum fracturae colla Britannae”) and suggests that the British dogs somewhat resembled the mediæval boorhound.

33. Verg. *Georg* iii., 24. (“Purpurea intexti tollant aulaea Britanni”).

triumphal games of Claudius in a mock attack on an imitation Camolodunum set up in the field of Mars.<sup>34</sup>

Grandeur and wildness of scenery were to most of the Romans merely untidy obstructions to comfort and conquest. Nor did they see romance and poetry in the deeds wrought in that desolate isle. There was material for poetry in the splendour, treachery and fall of Cartismandua,<sup>35</sup> the defiance of Caratacus,<sup>36</sup> and the struggle and death of Boudicca.<sup>37</sup> But it was material which the Roman poets would hardly care to mould into poetry in the shadow or glare of the Imperial throne.

The first reference to Britain in Roman poetry gives a good idea of the utter ignorance about it that prevailed just before Cæsar's invasion.

Nam quid Brittanni caelum differre putamus  
Et quod in Aegypto est qua mundi claudicat axis?<sup>38</sup>

(For what difference may we suppose exists between the climate of Britain and that of Egypt, where the pole of heaven slants askew?  
(Munro's trans.)

There is something thrilling in Julius Cæsar's dash across an unknown sea into an unknown land. No poet mentions that exploit except Lucan.

Territa quaesitis ostendit terga Britannis.<sup>39</sup>

(He first sought out the Britons, then fled in terror before them.)

Lucan vainly attempts to make a heroic figure of Pompey, and so dwarfs and distorts the deeds of Cæsar.

Twenty years after the invasion of Julius, Horace can still, as far as the tangible results of the campaigns are

34. Elton, p. 298.

35. Tac. *Ann.* xii., 36 and 40.

36. Tac. *Ann.* xii., 33—37.

37. *Ann.* xiv., 31, 35, 37. [On the form see p. 115 footnote 7.]

38. Lucr. vi., 1104; see reff. in Munro's note, which show that it was thought that at Britain the height of the sky from the ground was greater, and in Egypt and Ethiopia less, than anywhere else.

39. Lucan *Phars.* ii., 572.



concerned, speak of the "intactus Britannus,"<sup>40</sup> and so Tibullus even later of the "inuictus Romano Marte Britannus."<sup>41</sup>

No doubt Augustus saw, no less clearly than Julius Cæsar, the danger that threatened Gaul from an unconquered Britain. He may have really intended to undertake the expedition on more than one occasion.<sup>42</sup> He may have encouraged rumours which would unite the citizens by the thought of a common danger. Vergil and Horace prayed for his safe return. Augustus stayed at home.

Vergil, in 30 B.C., wonders whether  
tibi seruiat ultima Thule.<sup>43</sup>

(Is Thule, on the edge of the world, to come under thy sway?)

About five years later Horace calls on Fortune for her protection:—

Serues iturum Cæsarem in ultimos  
Orbis Britannos.<sup>44</sup>

(Keep Cæsar safe, who is about to go to Britain at the limit of the world.)

And again:—

Praesens diuos habebitur  
Augustus adiectis Britannis  
Imperio grauibusque Persis.<sup>45</sup>

(Augustus will be held a god here on earth to bless us, when he has added the Britons to the Empire and the formidable Parthians.)

About ten years later Horace breaks into a pæan of praise:—

40. Hor, *Epod.*, 7, 3.

41. Tib. iv., 1, 149.

42. Dio Cassius 22, 25.

43. Verg, *Georg. I.*, 30.

44. Hor. *Odes. I.*, 35, 29.

45. Hor. *Odes. III.*, S. 2.



Te fontium qui celat origines  
 Nilusque et Ister, te rapidus Tigris,  
 Te beluosus qui remotis  
 Obstrepit Oceanus Britannis,  
 Te non pauentis funera Galliae  
 Duraeque tellus audit Hiberiae.<sup>46</sup>

(You the Nile obeys that hides its sources, and the Danube, and the rapid Tigris, and the monster haunted ocean which roars against the shores of distant Britain, and the Gaul that has no fear of death, and the land of hardy Iberia.)

As far as the reference to Britain is concerned, this is a romantic and poetical way of stating that embassies were sent by some of the British princes to Augustus, with presents and assurances of friendship,<sup>47</sup> and in one or two cases with a request for protection. It is unfortunate that the empire-building of Claudius, and indeed of all the Emperors, is either exaggerated by the poets in terms of servile flattery or disparaged with the malice of personal dislike.

Seneca was banished in 41 A.D., and failed, even by the most fulsome flattery, to obtain his recall. After the death of the Emperor in 54 A.D., he vented his pent-up wrath against him in a bitter satire, the *Ἀποκολοκύντωσις*, a travesty in prose and verse of the supposed deification of Claudius. Seneca scoffs at his policy in enfranchising the provinces. The thought of Greeks, Gauls, Spaniards and Britons clad in the toga moves him to mirth.<sup>48</sup> His scornful contempt of the Britons who had suffered under his authority is no less bitter than his hatred of the Emperor.<sup>49</sup>

Here is the description of the choral dirge sung at

46. Hor. *Odes* IV., 14, 45.

47. Strabo, 4, 5, 3.

48. Chap. 3 (cp. Tac. *Ann.* xi., 23, 25).

49. Dio Cassius XII., 2.

Claudius' funeral, heard with delight by Claudius himself on his way to the scene of deification:—

Ille Britannos ultra noti  
litora ponti  
et caeruleos scuta Brigantas  
dare Romuleis colla catenis  
iussit et ipsum noua Romanae  
iura securis tremere Oceanum.<sup>50</sup>

(Then the Britons who dwell in the land that's beyond  
The shores of the sailable sea,  
The Brigantes with blue-painted shields he compelled  
To bear on their necks the fetters of Rome;  
And the Ocean itself he commanded to fear  
The *executive* power of the code of the Roman.)

Seneca intended this for an exaggerated description of the campaign. But is it so very much exaggerated? Claudius' triumphal pomp was inhuman, excessive and absurd, but the country was at least temporarily subjugated as far as the Humber.<sup>51</sup>

Claudius had conquered the ocean and a new world beyond it. The Court poets rose to the occasion. As there is not much variety of thought or expression in their effusions, we quote only a few typical lines:—

Qui finis mundo est non erat imperio.

(The limits of our empire are beyond the limits of the world.)

The free and independent Britons, whose home had been a storied island hidden in the middle of the sea, were subdued (*icta tuo, Cæsar, fulmine*).

Fabula uisa diu, medioque recondita ponto,  
Liberâ uictori quam cito colla dedit.

Happy country to have come under Cæsar's sway!

50. Chap. 12. He refers in chap. 8 to the temple dedicated to Claudius in his lifetime in Britain. Cf. Tac. *Ann.* xiv., 31.

51. Mommsen, *Prov. Rom. Emp.*, chap. v.

("Felix aduersis et sorte oppressa secunda.") The sun was never again to set on the Roman Empire.

Sol citra nostrum flectitur imperium

Et iam Romano cingimur Oceano.<sup>52</sup>

(The sun turns on its course on this side of the limits of our empire, . . . and now we are surrounded by a Roman ocean.)

The triumph of Claudius took place in 45 A.D. There does not seem to be any contemporary allusion in the Roman poets to the exploits of Agricola. Juvenal, who began to publish his satires in about 95 A.D., soon after Agricola's death, may refer in the following lines to his campaign or projected campaigns in the far North:—

Arma quidem ultra

Litora Iuuernae promouimus et modo captas

Orcadas, et minima contentos nocte Britannos.<sup>53</sup>

(We have moved our arms forward beyond the shores of Ireland and the lately taken Orkneys, and the Britons that are contented with the shortest nights, i.e., those farthest North.)

The other satires are full enough of references to this island to have given rise to the theory that it was his place of banishment.<sup>54</sup> At least he may have looked up the geographical and social conditions of the island as a possible place of exile.

In 120 A.D. Hadrian had to build his wall to keep off the tribes beyond the Tyne, and even before that there was unrest in Britain. The Brigantes<sup>55</sup> were troublesome and aggressive, and the death (in Domitian's reign possibly) of an obscure British chieftain is a type of the kind of

52. These and other quotations are given in Burmann's *Anthology Epp.* 84—91 (Auctore incerto).

53. Juv. ii., 160.

54. Duff's edition of Juvenal, p. xix.

55. Juv. xiv., 196, quoted above, p. 132. Cf. Furneaux' note on Agric. 30, 5.

victory for which the Emperor would be glad to hold a cheap and gaudy triumph.

A fisherman brings to Domitian an enormous turbot, and Veiento reads from it omens of success:—

Omen habes, inquit, magni clarique triumphi :  
Regem aliquem capies, aut de temone Britanno  
Excidet Aruiragus, peregrina est belua.<sup>56</sup>

(“You have an omen,” he says, “of a great and splendid triumph; you will take captive some chieftain, or Arviragus will fall from the pole of his chariot. It is a foreign monster.”)

There is one point to which no reference has been made—the influence of the Romans on the social condition of Britain during all these years of conquest and rule. The impression that we get from Roman poetry is merely that of a savage and worrying foe. If we had no hints from other sources, archæological and literary,<sup>57</sup> of the increasing culture of the Britons, we should think that such remarks as the following were entirely ironical:—

Nunc totus Graias nostrasque habet orbis Athenas  
Gallia caudicos docuit facunda Britannos.  
De conducendo loquitur iam rhetore Thule.<sup>58</sup>

(And now the whole world enjoys the culture of Greece and Rome. Glib Gaul has taught the Britons to be pleaders; now Thule talks of engaging a professor of rhetoric.)

Dicitur et nostros cantare Britannica uersus  
Quid prodest? Nescit sacculus ista meus.<sup>59</sup>

(It is said that even Britain recites my verses. What's the good of that? It does not affect my purse.)

Stattius, whose *Silvæ* were written about 95 A.D., contrasts the simple beginnings of Roman cities in central Britain with the elaboration of life and building in his

56. Juv. iv., 125.

57. e.g. Tac. *Agr.* 21.

58. Juv. xv., 110.

59. Martial vi., 3, 3.

day. An old man points out the changes to the son of a former Governor:—

Cum tibi longaeuus referet trucis incola terrae :  
 Hic suetus dare iura parens, hoc caespite turmas  
 Adfari uictor ; speculas castellaque longe  
 (Aspicis ?) ille dedit cinxitque haec moenia fossa ;  
 Belligeris haec dona deis, haec tela dicauit  
 (Cernis adhuc titulos) : hunc ipse uocautibus armis  
 Induit, hunc regi rapuit thoraca Britanno.<sup>60</sup>

(When the aged inhabitant of the savage land tells you, "Here was your father wont to lay down the law, on this mound of turf as victor to address his squadrons, he it was who set up watch-towers and distant forts (do you see them?), and who girdled these walls with a ditch. He dedicated to the gods of war these gifts and these weapons. (You can still see the inscriptions.) This corselet he put on at the call to arms, and this corselet he seized from a British king."

Let us return to the military events in the island. After Juvenal there is a long silence about Britain. During the third century A.D. the Picts and Scots and Saxons became more and more formidable by land and sea. In A.D. 368, in the reign of Valentinian, Theodosius was sent to Britain.<sup>61</sup> His exploits are told with much exaggeration by the poet Claudian:—

Ille Caledoniis posuit qui castra pruinis  
 . . . . . debellatorque Britanni  
 Litoris . . . . .  
 . . . . . Maduerunt Saxone fuso  
 Orcades, incaluit Pictorum sanguine Thule,  
 Scotorum cumulos fleuit glacialis Ierne.<sup>62</sup>

(He who pitched his camp in frosty Caledonia, . . . . .  
 . . . . . who utterly conquered the British shore. . . . .  
 The Orcades islands were wet with the slaughter of Saxons,  
 Thule reeked with the blood of the Picts, icy Ierne  
 Bewailed the piles of dead Scots.)

60. Stat. *Silu.* V., 2, 143.

61. Ammianus Marcellinus xxvii., xxviii.

62. *De IV. Cons. Honor.*, 26—33.

In 383 Maximus conducted a splendid and successful campaign against the Picts and Scots.<sup>63</sup> He left the island, and, with the help of the Roman and British soldiers whom he took with him, he became Emperor of the West. No doubt the withdrawal of these troops was the cause of a fresh inroad of Picts, Scots and Saxons.

In 396 A.D. they were for a time quelled by Stilicho. Britannia cries:—

Me quoque vicinis pereuntem gentibus, inquit,  
Muniuit Stilicho, totam cum Scotus Iernen  
Mouit, et infesto spumauit remige Tethys.  
Illius effectum curis ne tela timerem  
Scotica, ne Pictum tremere, ne litore toto  
Prospicerem dubiis uenturum Saxona uentis.<sup>64</sup>

(Me, too, when I was suffering ruin at the hands of neighbouring nations did Stilicho defend, when the Scot disturbed the whole of Ierne, and the sea was white with the oars of the foe. It was through his policy that I had no fear of the darts of the Scots nor of the Picts, and that as I looked out, I did not see along the whole line of shore the Saxon borne towards us by shifting winds.)

But barbarian hordes were pressing on Rome herself. In about 409 A.D. a stream of barbarians under "Radagaisius the Goth" poured into Italy, and Rome<sup>65</sup> needed all her best troops for her defence.

Probably the following lines refer to the withdrawal of the 20th legion.

Venit et extremis legio praetenta Britannis  
Quae Scoto dat frena truci, ferroque notatas  
Perlegit exsanguis Picto moriente figuras.<sup>66</sup>

(There came too the legion that is our outpost in furthestmost Britain, the legion which curbs the savage Scot and sees, as the Pict dies, the figures branded on him fade.)

63. Elton, p. 340. (Cf. p. 97 *supra*.)

64. Claud. *I. Cons. Stil.* ii., 250. For the suggestion that Stilicho never came to Britain himself see Gibbon's *Roman Empire*, chap. 30, vol. 3, p. 376, note.

65. "Exitii iam Roma timens." Claud. *de Bell. Gild.* 17.

66. Claud. *de IV. Cons. Hon.*, 31.

The time was drawing near when Britain, without power of government or cohesion, and drained of her best fighting men, was left to protect and govern herself. At the beginning of the fifth century A.D., in accordance with an Imperial rescript, the Roman forces were withdrawn. The references to Britain in the Roman poets cease. So do the Roman poets.

DORA LIMEBEER.