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Bread and Britons

In AD 42, one year after Claudius had come to power, a Roman governor by the name of Suetonius Paulinus led an army to the limits of Mauretania, and then beyond. The Moors, a people who lived just across the straits from Spain, and were renowned for their ability to hurl javelins while riding bareback and their high standards of dental hygiene, had long been within Rome's orbit; but only recently had the decision been taken to absorb them formally into the empire. There was much in Mauretania to excite the interest of the Roman upper classes – including, not least, its manufacture of the purple dye used to colour their togas. The last king of the Moors – who, by virtue of his descent from Antony and Cleopatra, had been related to Caligula – had opted, when summoned by his cousin to Lugdunum, to sport a particularly flashy shade of cloak. A fatal act of one-upmanship. Back in Mauretania, the Moors had greeted news of their king's execution with outrage. Rebellion had flared.

Claudius, inheriting the crisis from Caligula and reluctant to see it get out of hand, had duly ordered the kingdom transformed into a province. A hard-headed decision, made for hard-headed reasons – but not exclusively so. Scholar that he was, Claudius had an interest in distant regions that touched on more than affairs of state. South of the cities that lay just inland from the sea, where merchants from Italy were regular visitors and the architecture aped the best of Rome and Alexandria, there stretched an altogether different world. Inhabited by tribes so unspeakably savage that they ate flesh raw and

thought nothing of drinking milk, it had never before been penetrated by Roman arms. In turn, beyond them loomed an even more fantastical land, one long believed to be swathed in perpetual clouds, and where the inhabitants were reported never to have dreams. Suetonius Paulinus was leading his men up into the Atlas mountains, 'the pillar which supports the sky'.[25]

Reality, in the event, did not quite measure up to the fables told of the mountain range. There were deep snowdrifts, even in summer – but no perpetual clouds. The deserts beyond the Atlas mountains were scorching, and covered in black dust. The natives lived like dogs. Nevertheless, the expedition was not entirely a wasted effort. The forests that surrounded the mountain range, Paulinus reported back to Rome, were filled with wonders: towering trees with leaves that were covered with 'a thin downy floss'[26] much like silk; wild elephants; every conceivable kind of snake. Back in Rome, Claudius was delighted by the news. It played to all his passions. As a private citizen, denied by his disabilities the chance to travel, he had lovingly transcribed the details of exotic flora and fauna into a panoramic gazetteer: the aromatic leaves sprinkled by the Parthians on their drinks; a centaur born in northern Greece that had died the same day. Now, as emperor, he had a far broader stage on which to display his enthusiasms. Roman conquerors had long been in the habit of bringing back to their city plants and animals from remote lands. This was why, in gardens of the kind owned by Valerius Asiaticus, the smog-choked citizen might have a chance to breathe in the scents of distant forests, and to marvel at the blooms of strange flowers. It was also why beasts like those discovered by Paulinus were regular sources of entertainment in Rome. Pompey had exhibited the first rhinoceros to be seen in the city, Julius Caesar the first giraffe. Augustus, as a token of his victory over Egypt, had ridden through Rome with a hippopotamus waddling in his train, while Claudius himself, on formal occasions, might order elephants hitched to his chariot. It was no coincidence that all these creatures, and many more, had come from Africa – for the continent was famed as 'the wet-nurse of wild

beasts'.[27] Naturally, though, merely to exhibit them gave the Roman people an inadequate sense of the animals' ferocity, and of the achievement that transporting them from the ends of the earth represented. More educational, and certainly more crowd-pleasing, was to pit them in battle against trained huntsmen, and have them fight to the death. Only then could spectators gain a due sense of what legates like Paulinus, when they tamed lands teeming with lions and crocodiles, were achieving on behalf of the Roman people. Only then could they begin to appreciate the task undertaken by Claudius Caesar in pacifying and ordering the world.

Not that the subduing of wild beasts was the only measure of Roman greatness. At the opposite end of the world, amid the surging and the heaving of the Northern Ocean, lay challenges even more formidable than those met by Paulinus. No one could know for sure what lay beyond the limits explored by Roman fleets, although travellers spoke of islands inhabited by freakishly barbarous people, some with horses' hooves, others with ears so huge that they covered up their otherwise naked bodies – and ultimately, far beyond them, the mysterious land of Thule, and a terrible sea of frozen ice. For Claudius, the wilds and wonders of the Northern Ocean had a particular resonance, for it was his father, back in 12 BC, who had been the first Roman commander to sail it. Twenty-eight years later, Germanicus had repeated the exploit; and even though, since then, no Roman general had led a fleet across the Ocean, Claudius now had the chance to emulate his father and brother. Yet his ambitions did not stop at exploration. Lame though he was, and fifty-four years a civilian, he aimed at an even more heroic feat: the completion of a conquest left undone by Julius Caesar. It was time, not merely to cross the Ocean, but to carve out from it a new province: to win for the Roman people the island of Britain.

There were good reasons for Claudius to command its invasion in the early summer of 43. Circumstances had rarely looked so promising. The island itself was convulsed by dynastic upheavals. Not only had Cunobelin, the veteran chieftain of the Catuvellauni, recently died,

leaving his lands to two sons, but a neighbouring kingdom on the south coast had collapsed into such savage factionalism that its king had fled to the Romans. Simultaneously, on the opposite side of the Channel, preparations for an amphibious assault were well advanced. At Boulogne, where Caligula had ordered the construction of a towering lighthouse, some two hundred feet high, to light the way across the Ocean, a fleet sufficient to transport four legions awaited the command to set sail. The soldiers massing there bore witness to years of forward planning. Caligula's expedition to the North had not, as his critics charged, been a mere exercise in wild irresponsibility. It was thanks to the two legions recruited on his orders that a substantial invasion force could be readied without unduly weakening the Rhine defences. Meanwhile, on the Rhine itself, all was quiet. So well had Galba's campaign of pacification gone that Claudius, in his role of commander-in-chief, had been awarded triumphal honours. Two of the more contumacious German tribes had been decisively crushed. The glow of victory had been further burnished by the recapture of an eagle lost to Arminius. No better portent could possibly have been imagined.

Or could it? To the legionaries camped out on the Channel coast, anything that stirred up memories of the fate of Varus was liable to provoke deep unease. Bad enough as it was to be trapped on the wrong side of the Rhine, how much more terrifying was the prospect of being stranded on the wrong side of the Ocean. Few knew much about Britain – but what they did know was deeply off-putting. The natives were, if anything, even more barbarous than the Germans. They painted themselves blue; they held their wives in common; they wore hair on the upper lip, an affectation so grotesque that Latin did not even have a word for it. Nor were their women any better. They were reported to dye their bodies black, and even on occasion to go naked. Savages capable of such unspeakable customs were clearly capable of anything; and sure enough, just as it was part of the terror of the Germans that they practised murderous rites in the depths of their dripping forests, so did the Britons have priests who, in groves festooned with mistletoe, were reported to commit human sacrifice and

cannibalism. These 'Druids', as the priests were called, had once infested Gaul as well, until their suppression on the orders of Tiberius; but across the Ocean, beyond the stern reach of Roman law, they still thrived. 'Magic, to this very day, holds Britain in its shadow.'[28] No wonder, then, ordered to embark for a land of such sorcery and menace, that many soldiers should have blanched. Soon enough, murmurings were turning to open insurrection. Legionaries began to lay down their arms and refuse point-blank to board the transport ships.

Up stepped Narcissus. Sent ahead of his master, who had no intention of venturing to Britain until he could be confident that the invasion was a success, the freedman boldly addressed the mutineers and began to lecture them on their duty. He was immediately drowned out by howls of derision. The mood was turning uglier by the minute. It seemed that discipline had been entirely lost. Then all at once, one of the legionaries yelled '*Io Saturnalia!*' – and his comrades started to laugh. The cry was echoed across the entire camp. Abruptly, a holiday spirit took hold of the soldiers. The threat of violence was dissolved and the army brought back to obedience. When the legions boarded the transport ships, it was as though for a festival. Nor, from that point on, did anything further happen to shake their discipline. Instead, all went as well as the planners of the invasion could possibly have hoped. The seas for the crossing were calm; three bridgeheads established unopposed; the Britons twice defeated, and one of the two Catuvellaunian chieftains left dead on the battlefield. True, resistance was far from crushed. The surviving son of Cunobelin, a wily and indefatigable warrior named Caratacus, remained on the loose, while to the north and west of the island, in lands where even clay pots were a novelty, let alone coinage or wine, there lurked tribes who had barely heard of Rome. Nevertheless, with a crossing secured across the Thames and an encampment planted on the river's northern bank, the time had clearly come to send for the commander-in-chief. The glory of securing the final defeat of the Catuvellauni, and receiving their formal submission, belonged to one man, and one alone.

Note

Unless otherwise stated, 'Tacitus' refers to *The Annals*; Valerius Maximus to *Memorable Doings and Sayings*; Livy, Justin, Florus, Appian, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Cassius Dio, Velleius Paterculus and Herodotus to their respective Histories; Lucretius to *On the Nature of Things*; Petronius to *The Satyricon*; Lucan to *The Civil War*; Strabo to his *Geography*; Aulus Gellius to *Attic Nights*; Macrobius to *The Saturnalia*; Pliny to Pliny the Elder, and his *Natural History*; Artemidorus to *The Interpretation of Dreams*; Vitruvius to *On Architecture*; and Frontinus to *On Aqueducts*.

25 Herodotus: 4.184
26 Pliny: 5.1.14
27 Vitruvius: 8.2.24
28 Pliny: 30.13