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Batavians and the Roman Conquest of Britain*

By M. W. C. HASSALL

TACITUS'S account of the Claudian invasion of Britain and the campaigns that followed it down to the year 47 is unfortunately lost,[1] and historians have to be content with Dio, who gives the only consecutive account,[2] supplemented by scattered references in other sources. This short note is an attempt to extract a few more fragments of information from these literary sources and in particular it concerns the part played by Rome's Batavian auxiliaries.

The first definite evidence we have that Batavians were stationed in Britain comes from Tacitus who, in describing the preparations made by Nero for an expedition against the Albani of the Caucasus, says that units were withdrawn from several provinces including Britain, and from his later narrative it is clear that these included legion XIV and eight cohorts of Batavians who were attached to it.[3] The date is 67. However, there is strong reason to suppose that there were Batavians serving in Britain before this date, indeed from the invasion of 43 onwards. This is an inference derived from the known methods of fighting employed by the Batavians, and the descriptions of auxiliaries in action in Britain given by Tacitus and Dio. It was the proud boast and peculiar skill of the Batavians, that they could swim rivers fully armed, the cavalry still retaining control over their horses. This skill they had exhibited in the campaign of Germanicus against Arminius in attempting to cross the Ems[4] and were later to show in crossing the Po during the civil wars of 69.[5] Batavian cavalry could cross great rivers like the Rhine[6] and Danube[7] under arms and without breaking ranks. Accordingly the Κελτόι who during the invasion of 43 crossed the Medway and later the Thames in the face of strong enemy opposition to form a bridge-head for the army of Aulus Plautius[8] are usually identified with Batavians. The term Κελτόι is not a

* I would like to thank a number of colleagues and friends for reading this note in typescript and making valuable suggestions.

[1] The initial stage of the conquest probably came at the end of Annals, ix, subsequent events down to 47 in the first half of Annals, xi. See R. Syme, *Tacitus*, p. 260.

[2] Dio, lx, 19–21.

[3] Tac., *Hist.*, i, 6 with i, 59 and ii, 27; cf. iv, 15.

[4] Tac., *Ann.*, ii, 8.

[5] Tac., *Hist.*, ii, 17.

[6] Tac., *Hist.*, iv, 12.

[7] Dio, lxix, 9, 6; cf. *I.L.S.* 2558, under Hadrian.

[8] Dio, lx, 20.

difficulty since Dio regularly calls Germans, among whom the Batavians were generally classed,[9] by this name, while he calls Gauls Γαλάται.[10] Again it is very likely that Suetonius Paulinus used Batavian cavalry for his attack on Anglesey in 60, for on this occasion too Tacitus says that the troopers forded the straits and, where the water was too deep, swam by the side of their horses.[11]

Are these Batavians, whose presence in Britain from the time of the conquest until A.D. 60 has been argued, identical with those Batavian cohorts withdrawn by Nero in 67? These early references mention cavalry but this does not invalidate an identification with the eight cohorts of 67 since these latter were part-mounted, as we know from their demand at the outset of their mutiny in 69 that the cavalry element be increased.[12] The real difficulty in assuming that these cohorts had been in Britain since 43 lies in the fact that Nero sent auxiliary as well as legionary reinforcements to Britain after the Boudiccan revolt of 60 and that this involved precisely eight cohorts.[13] The number is suspiciously reminiscent of the eight Batavian cohorts to be recalled by Nero half a dozen years later. Cichorius[14] held the view that they were the same and was therefore of the opinion that there was no evidence for Batavians in Britain before 61. The circumstantial evidence for Batavians here during the conquest period is, however, strong and, even if one accepts Cichorius's point, the case for *other* Batavian units taking part in the opening phases of the conquest is not affected. Is there, in fact, additional evidence to suggest that they did serve before the year 61?

In a much quoted passage (*Histories*, iv, 12) Tacitus says as a general comment on the Batavians that they increased the renown won in long wars with the Germans by service in Britain, to which some cohorts had been sent under the command of their own nobles. As Professor Frere has pointed out,[15] the period 61–67 is not one in which they would have acquired a great reputation in Britain. They will have taken no part in the defeat of Boudicca when Legion XIV won the title Martia Victrix, and indeed the whole period will have fallen in the governorships of P. Petronius Turpilianus who, after the suppression of the revolt dared 'nihil ultra', and of M. Trebellius Maximus, under whom the army, accustomed to campaigns, 'otio lasciviret'.[16] Even if we discount the desire of Tacitus to belittle the achievements of these two 'unmilitary governors', and thus draw a contrast with 'viri militares' of the succeeding Flavian period, it is likely enough that this was a time of consolidation and it is difficult to see how reputations can have been won. If Tacitus in *Histories*, iv, 12 cannot be referring to the period immediately

[9] Tac., *Germ.*, 29, where the Batavians are included among tribes of German origin.

[10] A. Riese, *Forschungen zur Geschichte der Rheinlande* (Frankfurt am Main 1889), p. 14, note 4. Κελτική ist für Dio Germanien. Die Gallier nennt er Γαλάται, die Germanen κελτοί, Γερμάνια ist ein Ausdruck, der für ihn mit den rheinischen Legionen verbunden ist. Dies ist sein stetiger Sprachgebruch (with supporting references).

[11] Tac., *Ann.*, xiv, 29.

[12] Tac., *Hist.*, iv, 19.

[13] Tac., *Ann.*, xiv, 38.

[14] *R.E.*, iv i, 250.

[15] S. S. Frere, *Britannia* (London 1967), p. 61, note 1.

[16] Tac., *Agric.*, 16.

after 61, because of the absence of serious fighting, he cannot refer to the subsequent Flavian period when the advance in Wales and North Britain was continued, for after 69 and the Batavian revolt their cohorts will no longer have been commanded by their own countrymen. *Histories*, iv, 12 then, refers to the pre-Boudiccan period and either has no connection at all with the eight Batavian cohorts withdrawn by Nero in 67 but relates to other units present in Britain before 61, or, if it *does* refer to the units withdrawn in 67, they are not identical with the eight cohorts sent in 61. A third possibility is just conceivable: the eight cohorts of Batavians took part in the invasion but were withdrawn before the Boudiccan revolt; after it had been crushed Nero sent them again to Britain.[17]

It seems certain therefore that *Histories*, iv, 12 must refer to the pre-Boudiccan period and it is even possible that we can name one of the chiefs whom Tacitus there says commanded the Batavian cohorts in Britain. Julius Civilis was of noble birth[18] and commanded a cohort.[19] In 69 he had seen twenty-five years service with Rome,[20] which sounds like a round figure, but should mean that he had been enrolled about the time of the Claudian invasion of 43. He and his cohort could have been recruited by Gaius, who probably enrolled two new legions, XV and XII Primigenia, if Gaius's enlistment of Batavians in A.D. 40 extended beyond those for his own bodyguard.[21] This suggestion even finds some slight support in Civilis's *nomen*, Julius, which hints at a grant of citizenship made to him on enlistment by Gaius. The Batavian Julius Briganticus's father (Civilis's brother-in-law) could have received citizenship at the same time, while others such as Claudius Labeo, and Claudius Victor will have received it from Gaius's successor. Above all Civilis claimed before Petillius Cerealis that he had been a friend of Vespasian before he became emperor.[22] Such an association was a potential embarrassment to the Flavian party, whom Civilis had claimed to support during the early stages of his rebellion, and a tie with Vespasian himself was unlikely to have been invented by a pro-Flavian historian like Pliny (Tacitus's presumed source).[23] If Vespasian and Civilis had really been friends, when could they have become acquainted? Vespasian had been put in charge of Legion II by Claudius through the influence of Narcissus, and in 43 had accompanied it from Germany to Britain where he had fought with distinction.[24] And Civilis will most likely have

[17] The view of M. Bang for whose discussion of the history of Batavian auxiliary units see *Die Germanen im Römischen Dienst* (Berlin 1906), pp. 32–39.

[18] Tac., *Hist.*, i, 13, regia stirpe.

[19] Tac., *Hist.*, iv, 16 and 32.

[20] Tac., *Hist.*, iv, 32.

[21] Suet., *Caligula*, 43, where Suetonius says that Gaius undertook his expedition to Germany in order to get new recruits for his Batavian bodyguard. The immediate reason in fact was to suppress the revolt of Gaetulicus in *Upper* Germany. However, P. Bicknell argues persuasively in the 'The Emperor Gaius' Military Activities in A.D. 40' *Historia*, xvii (1968), 496–505 that Gaius did at least visit Lower Germany in A.D. 40 and that the army of the Lower Rhine carried out minor operations against the Canninefates from the Insula Batavorum (cf. especially Tac. *Hist.*, iv, 15).

[22] Tac., *Hist.*, v, 26.

[23] Cf. P. A. Brunt, *Latomus*, xix (1960), p. 510.

[24] Suet., *Vesp.*, 4 with Tac., *Hist.*, iii, 44.

met him during this period.[25] This would fit extremely well. For it was Vespasian who, with his brother Sabinus, was sent to reinforce the bridgehead formed by the 'Batavians' during the 'Battle of the Medway'.[26]

There is a hint of one other theatre of operations for Batavian forces in Britain during the early conquest period. Tacitus, when recounting the feud between Venutius and Queen Cartimandua and its subsequent consequences for Rome, tells us that Venutius, whose Brigantian extraction he has already mentioned (this will be in one of the lost books of the Annals), had long been loyal and had received the protection of Roman arms during his married life with Queen Cartimandua.[27] This can only mean that, in the words of E. Birley, 'within the four years when Plautius was in Britain (43–47) there were Roman troops operating in Brigantian territory in support of its ruling house'.[28] Now Civilis had a nephew Julius Briganticus, his sister's son, who loyally supported the Romans against his uncle during the Batavian revolt. The cognomen could well derive from the name of the north British tribe,[29] and if Briganticus was in his mid-twenties in 69 he should have been born during the early years of the Claudian invasion of Britain. It does not seem impossible that Briganticus's father, like his brother-in-law Civilis, commanded a cohort of Batavians in Britain, and that his son's name recalls some successful operation in Brigantian territory. In giving his son such a name he would not lack famous precedents. The practice of coining a cognomen from a conquered barbarian people was common under the republic and continued under the empire, when it was not restricted to the imperial house. Thus Cossus Cornelius Lentulus after his north African victory in A.D. 5/6 bestowed the name Gaetulicus, derived from that of the Gaetulians, upon his son,[30] while of particular relevance both as regards date and geographical setting is the case of Gabinius Secundus, legate of Lower Germany in 41, whom Claudius allowed to assume the name 'Cauchius' because of his conquest of the 'Cauchi' (=Chauci).[31] The clearest precedent however would have been the imperial one, for the Senate not only gave Claudius the title Britannicus in 43, but gave the same name to the emperor's son.[32] That more humble folk could coin such exotic cognomina for themselves is shown by the cognomen Actiacus derived from Octavian's great naval victory borne by veterans of Legion XI settled at Ateste, and that they did so for their children can be demonstrated, to cite but two examples, by the name borne by the son of a chief pilot of the Classis Britannica

[25] Cf. G. Walser: *Rom, das Reich und die fremden Völker*, p. 91: 'Vermutlich bestanden zwischen den batavischen Truppen und Vespasian alte Beziehungen aus der Zeit, als Vespasian Legionslegat in Germanien und Britannien war.'

[26] Dio, lx, 20.

[27] Tac., *Ann.*, xii, 40.

[28] E. Birley, *Roman Britain and the Roman Army* (Kendal, 1953), p. 47.

[29] Not discussed by I. Kajanto: *The Latin Cognomina*, p. 52, cognomina from conquered towns, peoples, etc. Lewis and Short derive Briganticus from Brigantes, v. sub *Brigantes*. A derivation from the Brigantii of the Lake Constance region is also theoretically possible.

[30] Velleius, ii, 116.

[31] Suet., *Div. Claud.*, 24.

[32] Dio, lx, 22.

under the Flavians—Oceanus!—and that of Arminius's nephew, who was called Italicus by his pro-Roman father, Flavus.[33] Vespasian's own presence with the Batavians in Brigantian territory is not entirely out of the question either—at all events Flavian propagandists later linked Vespasian's name with operations in the far north.[34]

To summarize: it seems likely that there were Batavians from the year 43 onwards serving in Britain, and that *Histories*, iv, 12, which describes their coming under the command of their own chiefs, refers to this period. Further, that Civilis may have been one of these chiefs and his brother-in-law another, and that the latter saw action in the north of the island connected with the operations hinted at by Tacitus, in his back-reference to a previous mention of the Brigantes in a lost book of the Annals.

What part, finally, did Batavians play in Britain after their revolt was crushed in 70? We know that Agricola employed four cohorts of Batavians at Mons Graupius[35] and, as already suggested, it is morally certain that some at least of the 'lectissimi auxilarium quibus nota vada et patrius nandi usus quo simul seque et arma et equos regunt'[36] used by him during the second Roman invasion of Anglesey were Batavians also. The only problem concerns the exact identity of the units involved. The eight cohorts which revolted in 69 will have been disbanded (a ninth—cohors IX Batavorum equitata milliaria exploratorum—was not).[37] Richmond[38] believed that Agricola's Batavian cohorts were milliary and are to be identified with cohorts I, II and III milliariae which by the end of the first century or later were in other provinces.[39] If this view is correct, it may be that the eight quingenary (?) cohorts of the Batavian revolt were disbanded only to be reformed as four milliary cohorts and quickly sent back to Britain. There is, however, some doubt as to the strength of the original eight Batavian cohorts. If cohors IX was milliary they *should* have been milliary also, despite the apparent rareness of milliary cohorts during this period. That Agricola's Batavian cohorts included at least some veterans is suggested by the phrase 'vetustas militiae' applied to them at the time of Mons Graupius. The quingenary Cohors I Batavorum attested in Britain for the first time in 122[40] will then belong to a

[33] E.g. *I.L.S.* 2243, M. Billienus M.f. Rom(ilia) Actiacus legione XI proelio navali facto in coloniam deductus, with the other examples quoted in the article by Ensslin cited below. *Dig.*, xxxvi, 1, 48 (Oceanus), Tac., *Ann.*, xi, 16 (Italicus). The name of Arminius himself may be a geographical cognomen 'Armenius'—the Armenian, given him as one of the companions of C. Caesar to the east and Armenia in A.D. 1. See the discussion of the suggestion of E. Hohl by W. Ensslin, 'Arminius-Armenius?' *Das Gymnasium* liv/lv 1943/44, p. 64 ff. Ensslin however tentatively supported a Teutonic derivation. Examples of cognomina used by the aristocracy and derived from some special geographical connection could be multiplied under the empire.

[34] Momigliano, *J.R.S.*, xl, 1950, p. 41 f.

[35] Tac., *Agric.*, 36. quattuor—so the best MS. See R. M. Ogilvie and Sir Ian Richmond, *De Vita Agricolae* (Oxford 1967), introduction, p. 78.

[36] Tac., *Agric.*, 18.

[37] E. Stein, *Römische Beamte und Truppenkörper in Deutschland*, p. 167.

[38] Ed. Richmond and Ogilvie. *De Vita Agricolae*, p. 78.

[39] For these units see most conveniently Cichorius in *R.E.*, iv, (249 f.) and the indexes of *C.I.L.*, xvi.

[40] *C.I.L.*, xvi, 69.

different series, and this is perhaps the most likely explanation though others are possible.[41] The subsequent history of Cohors I Batavorum quingenaria, the only Batavian unit to remain in Britain, is not here relevant. It has left epigraphic records at Carvoran on Hadrian's Wall, possibly Castlecary on the Antonine Wall, and most notably at Carrawburgh on the former, where it is also stationed in the Notitia.[42]

[41] Bang, *op. cit.*, thought that Agricola's Batavian cohorts were quingenary and that the Cohors I Batavorum later attested in Britain was one of them. After their withdrawal to the continent cohorts II and III were made up to milliary strength and a new milliary cohort I was added to complete the series.

[42] It has recently been suggested by J. E. Bogaers, *Studien zu den Militärgrenzen Roms* (Beihefte der Bonner Jahrbücher, xix, p. 75) that finds of North British trumpet fibulae and of a late La Tène mirror of British type from Nijmegen are to be connected with the presence of the IXth legion there in the early years of the second century. This is perhaps true of those trumpet fibulae whose provenance is adequately recorded, since these came from the legionary cemetery. But the mirror came from the Gräberfeld unter Hees which belongs to the civil settlement of Ulpia Noviomagus, and this, at least, could equally well have been brought back by a returning Batavian veteran.