Tacitus and the Rebellion of Boudicca*

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Ostorius Scapula, governor of Britain A.D. 47–52, was responsible for two moves which brought about a rebellion in A.D. 47 led by the Iceni: i.e. the decision to disarm British tribes and the founding of a veteran colony at Camulodunum. The latter is described by Tacitus¹ as having directly caused the Trinovantes to join Boudicca’s rebellion, while the former must have left a feeling of resentment among the Iceni, particularly those who were anti-Roman in sentiment, as an indication of what their capitulation to Rome might entail.

Dio’s Boudicca mentions taxation as an outstanding abuse of their power by the Romans and dilates on the topic at some length.³ This may support the conjecture of D. R. Dudley and G. Webster⁴ that a general revision of the taxes of the province may well have been held by the Romans c. A.D. 57. Although such a measure is not mentioned by any ancient author, the conjecture is attractive: Britain was proving expensive and the customary five-yearly census would have been due in Camulodunum at about this time. Perhaps this task was entrusted to the procurator, Catus Decianus, and was the beginning of the province’s hatred of him.⁵

Suetonius Paulinus, governor of Britain at the time of Boudicca’s rebellion, seems to have had a very one-sided approach to his task of governing Britain: apparently he saw it in purely military terms. In his summary of Agricola’s early career, Tacitus mentions his service on the headquarters staff of Suetonius and describes it from a purely military point of view.⁶ It seems that Agricola learnt the value and values of civilian government⁷ elsewhere. The harshness of Suetonius after the rebellion is well-known, but the Britons had apparently experienced the heaviness of his hand before the rebellion broke out in view of their reaction to him later.⁸ Certainly it would appear that, if Suetonius was not actually in collusion with Catus, he nevertheless took no steps to check the latter’s rapacity, just as Catus did not attempt to control Suetonius’ streak of

5. Tac. Ann. XIV.32.3.
6. Tac. Agric. 5.
7. Tac. Agric. 9. 2–5.
8. Tac. Agric. 16.2.
cruelty. Though Tacitus\(^9\) acquits Suetonius of any responsibility for the rebellion, his guilt is manifest, not only as far as the overall treatment of the provincials is concerned, but also in the specific case of the incorporation of the Iceni into the province.\(^10\)

Dio\(^11\) mentions a further cause of the rebellion: Seneca had lent the Britons forty million sesterces, had recalled this loan and resorted to severe measures in exacting it. C. M. Bulst\(^12\) accepts Dio's statement, basing his argument on the furious outburst of the delator Suillius,\(^13\) but this passage does not mention Britain specifically, and in view of its context one feels that Bulst may be unwise to attach so much weight to it. Though Tacitus' attitude to Seneca is ambivalent, he would surely not have passed over so infamous a loan in what amounts to silence.

Still, it is quite probable that the Britons, like other provincials, had, in fact, fallen into the clutches of moneylenders and the extension, by Suetonius Paulinus, of military operations in a notoriously difficult area may have caused usurers to call in their loans, thus creating a financial panic. C. E. Stevens\(^14\) suggests as the reason for calling in the loans Nero's plan to abandon Britain,\(^15\) but it is impossible to date this otherwise unattested plan and a time when Suetonius Paulinus was everywhere successful\(^16\) seems a rather unlikely one to choose.

Dio\(^17\) also states that Catus demanded the repayment of money given by Claudius to tribal noblemen.\(^18\) Such gifts are mentioned elsewhere by Dio\(^19\) and also by Caesar.\(^20\) Probably the gifts to the Iceni were reclaimed because they were about to forfeit client-kingdom status.\(^21\) It seems more likely that Catus was acting on the instructions of the imperial government than that he recalled the money on his own initiative.

A more immediate cause of the rebellion was the death of Prasutagus, king of the Iceni. Very little is known about him. No coins minted by him have been found, which suggests that he only became king in or after A.D. 43. It is possible that Prasutagus was made king by the Romans after the rebellion in A.D. 47, as Ostorius Scapula would have wished, if possible, to give the throne to a nominee

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10. See below on the death of Prasutagus.
11. LXII. 2.1.
14. CR. n.s. 1, 1951, 4ff.
17. Loc. cit.
18. Unless Ann. XIV.31.1 ‘praecipui quique Icenorum, quasi cunctam regionem muneri accipissent, avitis bonis exuuntur’ is to be understood as referring to this (cf. Bulst, art. cit.): it does not seem very likely.
20. BG. 1.43.3.
21. See below on the death of Prasutagus.
whose loyalty was absolutely assured, but it is not certain whether the governor was in a position to make any changes since he faced serious opposition elsewhere. It is also possible that the rebellion in A.D. 47 was the work of an anti-Roman faction which won a temporary ascendancy and that once this was broken Ostorius simply left Prasutagus on the throne. Either theory would accord well with Tacitus' description of Prasutagus as 'longa opulentia clarus'.

When Prasutagus died, he left a will naming his two daughters and Nero as his heirs, hoping, says Tacitus, to protect his kingdom and his family. He had been a client-king, but the relationship was with him as an individual, and on his death the Romans had to make a new arrangement. The trend in Roman provincial administration at this time was to regard client-kingdom status as a halfway stage to ultimate complete absorption into a province, and to make the client-king arrangement a fairly short-term one. By bequeathing his kingdom to his daughters and the Roman emperor, Prasutagus hoped to secure for his family continuation of power: possibly he hoped his daughters would be acceptable to the Romans as potential wives for client-kings who might be appointed to replace him: and the exclusion of his wife Boudicca was almost certainly deliberate policy—she may have headed an anti-Roman faction which Prasutagus thought it wise to exclude from Icenian affairs.

However, the Romans decided to incorporate the kingdom in the province and the transition was accompanied by many abuses. The Romans deliberately broke the power, not only of the royal household, but also of the Icenian nobles, and they did it very harshly. The staffs of both the governor and the procurator were involved. In view of this, Suetonius must be regarded as being to some extent responsible for the rebellion, since it was these outrages that finally sparked it off.

Bulst acquires Suetonius of any responsibility for these atrocities, suggesting that the governor was already on his way to Anglesey and that what his staff did they did on their own initiative. There is no evidence to support such a theory: indeed, as Bulst himself realises, there is a point which tells heavily against it, for Tacitus does not blame the procurator specifically in this connection though later he lays the whole responsibility for the rebellion at Catus' door. Further, it is extremely unlikely that the staff of a man as irascible and vindictive as Suetonius would have dared to embark on so bold a course of action in such an important matter without his knowledge and approval.

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30. *Ann.* XIV. 32.3.
We do not know when Prasutagus died, but it was early enough for news of
his death to have reached Rome and for instructions to have come through from
the imperial government to Suetonius before he left for a new campaigning
season in Snowdonia where he intended to start with an attack on Anglesey for
which preparations were already being made. There is no evidence that the
Romans expected any trouble to result from the enlargement of the province
(the fact that the rebellion took them completely unawares is sufficient proof of
this), so it is not surprising that Suetonius did not wait to see his instructions
about the incorporation of the Iceni implemented. With his militaristic outlook,
it would not occur to him that he should delay rejoining the army in order to
deal with a matter that could be handled well enough (to his way of thinking) by
his staff and the procurator. In view of Tacitus’ very favourable presentation
of Suetonius his vagueness about who was ultimately responsible for the
atrocities makes one suspect that it was in fact the governor (quite apart from
the very different picture of Suetonius that is gleaned from even a superficial
examination of the facts recorded by Tacitus).

Druidism should not be overlooked as one of the most important factors in
the reasons for and the timing of the rebellion. Suetonius had been sent to
Britain to pursue a forward policy there as Corbulo was doing in the East. Once
he had brought the operations in Wales, begun by Q. Veranius, to a
successful conclusion, the obvious point for him to attack next was Anglesey
which was a stronghold of the Druids and so also of resistance to Rome. It
must have been obvious to the Druids that there was a very strong probability that
Suetonius would attack Anglesey early in the next campaigning season: this
became certainty when the Romans began their preparations. Druidic
influence among the Iceni is indicated by the fact that the Arminghall monu­
ment is so similar to Stonehenge and Bulst feels certain that Boudicca’s
position was semi-religious and connected with Druidism.

Tacitus records the fact that the Britons sowed no crops in the year in which
the rebellion broke out. One of the reasons for this must have been to allow the
Britons to muster all their forces as early as possible. Dudley and Webster suggest that the Britons wanted to get the rebellion under way early in the year
because this was the time when the Romans would be least likely to expect any

32. Tacitus’ narrative makes it clear that the Romans were caught off-guard: see especially Ann. XIV. 32.
33. See below.
38. See also Dio, LXII.6.1.
39. Ann. XIV. 38.2. I accept Tacitus’ date for the rebellion: see my article, The Date of
Boudicca’s Rebellion, which is still in preparation.
trouble. However, it is far more likely that the purpose behind such an early start to the rebellion was to forestall the projected attack on Anglesey by drawing Suetonius back to the south with his troops: and so it would seem that the Druids were deeply involved, not only in planning this particular feature of British strategy, but probably also in actually inspiring the rebellion.

However, Suetonius had successfully attacked Anglesey before he heard the news that a rebellion had broken out in the south. 41 This indicates that the attack on Anglesey took place very early in the year, since the rebellion itself was timed to start so early that the Britons did not even sow any crops.

The account of the opening moves of the Britons given by Tacitus in Annals XIV.32.2–3 differs from that in Agricola 16.1. In the former passage the sequence of events is as follows: the Britons attack Camulodunum and sack it. The Britons (probably a second assault force) meet and defeat Petilius Cerialis and the IXth legion who have been summoned to the south. This account cannot be reconciled with Agricola 16.1: ‘sparsos per castella milites consectati, expugnatis præsidii ipsam coloniam invasere.’ An immediate attack on the castella should in fact have been British strategy, since the rebels, having sown no crops, desperately needed supplies. But the balance of probability inclines in favour of the account in Annals XIV for a number of reasons:

1) Dio, whose sources seem to have been good 42 makes no mention of an attack on the castella. 43
2) Tacitus is far more accurate and detailed in his account in Annals XIV than he is in the Agricola, which is highly rhetorical. 44
3) The Britons did in fact run short of supplies, which indicates that they did not concentrate on the systematic reduction of the castella.
4) Tacitus 45 emphasizes how large the colony bulked in the minds of the Britons. It had no defences 46 and was the obvious place to attack first: probably Boudicca would have found it hard to direct the operations of her force anywhere else.

The inhabitants of Camulodunum sent to Catus for help and he managed to find a force of two hundred men which he sent to the colony. Tacitus 47 plays this down, implying that the procurator might have done more. In fact, Catus had not only to consider the defence of Camulodunum (which after all was a veteran

42. E.g. he describes Boudicca’s torque (LXII.2.4), an ornament attested by archaeological finds.
43. LXII. 7.1.
44. E.g. in Agric. 16.1 he states that ‘universi (Britanni)’ joined in the rebellion, whereas the only tribes definitely known to have done so as a whole are the Iceni and the Trinovantes. Probably Boudicca’s other supporters came from anti-Roman groups in some tribes. The speed with which the rebellion broke out and was suppressed indicates that a general rising of the Britons against Roman rule could not have taken place.
46. Ann. XIV. 31.3.
47. Ann. XIV. 32.2.
colony and so might be expected more or less to be able to defend itself), but had also to provide for the possibility of simultaneous attacks on London and Verulamium. He could not be sure that regular troops would arrive in time to defend either town, though he had sent a message at once to Petilius Cerialis, legate of the IXth legion which was stationed at Lindum and might be able to bring help more quickly than the governor. After the defeat of Cerialis, there was no sizeable Roman force which could keep the Britons out of London and Verulamium, since Suetonius and his army were too far away. Catus fled to Gaul.

That it was at this stage that the situation was reported to Suetonius seems clear from the following: he knew he could not count on the IXth legion to support him for it formed no part of his plan of action: also, he knew he had to move to the south very quickly, since he marched to London with only a fraction of his troops and was unable to risk a battle. He had summoned the IInd legion from Gloucester, only two days' march from London, as a back-up force but his orders were disobeyed. The IInd legion did not join him either then or later. The Britons fell to looting London and Verulamium instead of attacking the castella (which would have secured supplies) or pursuing Suetonius, who had been forced to abandon the towns (because he had so few troops with him), in order to prevent his linking up with reinforcements. A swift deterioration of discipline is not surprising in Boudicca's conglomerate horde.

The narratives of both Tacitus and Dio now move on immediately to an account of the decisive battle of the rebellion. The Britons had obviously to deal with Suetonius before making any further moves: should they manage to defeat the force Suetonius had now collected, the remaining isolated Roman troops could not offer much resistance. The shortage of supplies meant that both sides had to come to battle quite quickly, and the Britons had, in addition, to face the probability that reinforcements would soon be sent to Suetonius from the Continent. However much one may doubt that such strategical considerations would have carried any weight with the horde Boudicca commanded, there is also this consideration: the Britons were flushed with victory. Camulodunum, London and Verulamium had fallen with scarcely a struggle, the IXth legion had been routed and even Suetonius had not dared to face them. In short, for once inclination and strategy dictated the same course of action.

The Romans won the battle and brought concentrated British resistance to an

49. This seems the best explanation of Tacitus' statements at Ann. XIV. 33.1 and 37.3. Poenius Postumus was probably afraid of being defeated by rebel elements if he attempted a march to London. He could not have considered long-term consequences e.g. the probable fate of his camp should Suetonius, deprived of his support, be heavily defeated.
51. Tac. Ann. XIV. 38.2; Dio, LXII. 8.1.
end. Boudicca died not long afterwards. However, scattered groups of Britons continued to defy the Romans and Suetonius collected his whole army together to deal with these die-hard elements. Reinforcements sent to Britain by the imperial government from Germany brought the IXth legion up to strength. It was obvious that Roman control over the province was not as strong as had been thought and that special and radical measures of some kind were called for to deal with the situation.

Suetonius decided that the first step must be a bloody display of Roman military superiority. The defects of this policy are made clear by Tacitus himself; instead of encouraging stubborn elements to surrender, it made it clear to them that they had nothing to lose by continuing to resist. As a policy, it was both expensive and wasteful.

The new procurator, Julius Classicianus, realised this. He was at odds with Suetonius and tried hard to mitigate the effects of the governor's harshness. He privately spread the word that Suetonius' policy was individual and not official, and was likely to change with a change of governor: at the same time he urged the imperial government to make a change.

It is hard to fault this analysis of the situation. The soundness of Classicianus' view and the fact that the imperial government shared it, was confirmed by the policy of Suetonius' successor, Petronius Turpilianus, and the results he achieved.

But the imperial government had to face a dilemma: on the one hand, Suetonius had achieved some resounding successes in Wales and had also defeated Boudicca. He had been chosen to further Roman military aims in Britain and in this he had been successful. It would not be easy to recall him without expressing official disapproval of his policy of brutal revenge. On the other hand, if he were allowed to pursue this policy unchecked, he or his successor might well have another serious rebellion to cope with before very long. As a result of the disturbing reports submitted by the procurator, one of the imperial freedmen, Polyclitus, was soon sent to Britain to assess the situation. Suetonius was recalled as soon as an opportunity to do so arose.

Tacitus' bias in favour of Suetonius Paulinus and against Polyclitus and the two procurators so colours his narrative in Annals XIV. 29–39, and to some extent also in Agricola 15–16, as to give an impression of the roles played by

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52. Tac. Ann. XIV. 37.3; Dio, LXII. 12.6. As Dio's sources seem to have been good (my note 42), and since his account is less dramatic, it should probably be accepted.
54. Tac. loc. cit.
55. Tac. Agric. 16.2.
56. Tac. Ann. XIV. 38.3.
57. Tac. Agric. 16.3.
60. Polyclitus and the procurators are not specifically mentioned in the Agricola, and the whole tone of Tacitus' narrative here is rhetorical (see my note 44).
them in the rebellion which is very different from that suggested by the facts themselves. The existence and extent of Tacitus' bias can easily be proved by an examination of his narrative.

It is not surprising, in view of traditional senatorial attitudes, that Tacitus should be extremely hostile to the freedman, Polyclitus. The freedman's journey through Italy and Gaul is represented as an imposition—'nec defuit Polyclitus quo minus ingenti agmine Italie Galliaeque gravis - - - incederet'. The contrast between the Romans, to whom the freedman is 'terribilis', and the Britons, to whom he is 'inrisui', is carefully made and ironically concluded—'mirabanturque (Britanni) quod dux et exercitus tanti belli confector servitii oboedirent'.

This passage also tells in favour of Suetonius by glossing over the actual activities of Polyclitus in Britain. It is impossible even to ascertain how long he spent there. As far as his assessment of the situation and the results of his report to the imperial government are concerned, Tacitus' narrative is very misleading. 'cuncta tamen ad imperatorem in mollius relata; detentusque rebus gerundis Suetonius, quod postea paucas navis in litore remigiumque in is amiserat, tamquam durante bello tradere exercitum Petronio Turpiliano qui iam consulatu abierat iubetur.' It is not easy to determine what is meant by 'cuncta tamen ad imperatorem in mollius relata'. Does it mean that the freedman simply played the whole situation down in his report? In view of the fact that the governor was recalled as soon as an opportunity to do so arose, this seems very unlikely; and if this is what Tacitus intended to convey, he is whitewashing Suetonius by dissociating his recall from Polyclitus' report. Are we to understand from 'cuncta .. relata' that Polyclitus glossed over his own failure to reconcile governor and procurator and also the hostile attitude of the Britons towards him? If so, the sentence becomes detrimental to Polyclitus and favourable to Suetonius since once again the connection between his recall and the freedman's report is obscured.

What did Polyclitus report? Presumably that the situation in Britain might easily be settled by another governor who would be more humane and understanding, and that an expensive and lengthy series of campaigns would not be necessary. That this is what lies behind 'cuncta .. relata' seems certain in view of 1) the fact that the imperial government recalled Suetonius as soon as an opportunity to do so arose, and 2) the policy followed by Petronius Turpilianus.

There are elements in Annals XIV.39.3, in addition to what has been discussed above, which indicate a bias in favour of Suetonius, e.g. 'tamquam

61. An interpretation based on the facts supplied by Tacitus has been outlined above.
62. Tac. Ann. XIV. 39.2. I have not discussed Ann. XIV. 39.1 which is directed chiefly against Nero.
63. Ann. XIV. 39.3.
64. Tac. Agric. 16.3.
durante bello' which plays down the realities of the situation, and the sneer at
Petronius which follows the passage quoted above: 'is non inritato hoste neque
lacessitus honestum pacis nomen segni otio imposit'. This device of presenting
Suetonius in the most favourable possible light by contrasting him to his
advantage with the governors who preceded and succeeded him is used by
Tacitus in both the Agricola and the Annals: e.g. 'neque A.Didius legatus, ut
memoravi, nisi parta retinuerat, et successor Veranius modicis excursibus
Siluras populatus, quin ultra bellum proferret, morte prohibitus est, magna,
dum vixit, severitas fama, supremis testamenti verbis ambitionis manifestus .

. . . sed tum Paulinus Suetonius obtinebat Britannos; 'mox Didius Gallus
parta a prioribus continuit, paucis admodum castellis in ulteriora promotis,
per quae fama aucti officii quaeeretur. Didium Veranius except, isque intrn
annum extinctus est. Suetonius hinc Paulinus biennio prosperas res habuit,
subactis nationibus firmatisque praesidiis. Tacitus also implicitly dissociates Suetonius from the atrocities perpetrated
by his staff in annexing the Iceni. Nowhere does Tacitus criticize Suetonius' purely militaristic approach to his governorship and this is remarkable in view
of Agricola 19, e.g. 'ceterum (Agricola) animorum provinciae prudens,
simulque doctus per aliena experientia parum profici armis, si iniuriae
sequerentur, causas bellorum statuit excidere.' When Tacitus does mention
Suetonius' harshness, it is never with disapproval. The blame for the rebellion
is laid at the door of Catus Decianus alone: 'qua clade et odiis provinciae quam
avaritia eius in bellum egerat trepidus procurator Catus in Galliam transit.' Not only does Tacitus acquit Suetonius, he also contrasts the procurator's flight
with the governor's courage: the passage just quoted is followed by the words
'tum Paulinus mira constantia medioces inter hostis Londinium perrexit.'

As far as the events which followed the rebellion are concerned, Tacitus is more
candid in the Agricola than in the Annals. It is interesting to compare Agricola
16.2 ('Britanniam) unius proelii fortuna veteri patientiae restituit (Suetonius),
tenentibus arma plerisque, quos conscientia defectionis et proprius ex legato
timor agitabat, ne quamquam egregius cetera adroganter in deditos et ut suae
cuiusque iniuriae ulterioribus consuleret' with Annals XIV.38.3 'gentesque
praefectores tardius ad pacem inclinabant quia Iulius Clasicianus, successor
Cato missus et Suetonio discors, bonum publicum privatis simulacribus
impediebat disperseratque novum legatum oppriprendum esse, sine hostili roses et
superbia victoris clementer deditis consulturum. simul in urbem mandabat,

65. Didius Gallus, Q. Veranius, Petronius Turpilianus. See also Tacitus' remarks about
Trebellius Maximus and Vettius Balanus (Agric. 16.3–5).
67. Agric. 14.2–3. See also Agric. 16.3.
69. E.g. Agric. 16.2; Ann. XIV. 38.3.
70. Ann. XIV. 32.3.

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nullum proeliorum finem expectarent, nisi sucederetur Suetonio, cuius adversa pravitati ipsius, prospera ad fortunam referebat.'

In the former passage, Suetonius' harshness is admitted but not condemned: it becomes an explanation for the continuing military operations, instead of the cause of a wasteful and potentially dangerous policy. In the latter passage, however, the blame for the continuing resistance of the Britons is laid at the door of the new procurator. The advice given to the provincials by Classicianus was excellent, but Tacitus obscures its cogency. The statement 'bonum publicum privatis simultatibus impediebat' makes the procurator's wise words look like a totally unstatesmanlike piece of gratuitous back-biting: all the impact is thus also removed from the words 'hostili ira' and 'superbia victoris' which in fact depict the literal truth about Suetonius' attitude and would otherwise make a very different impression on the reader. The same technique is used in the case of Classicianus' reports to the imperial government. The statement 'cuius adversa pravitati ipsius, prospera ad fortunam referebat' obscures the soundness of the procurator's view of the situation. It was quite true that resistance would continue in Britain as long as Suetonius was governor, but the nasty aura of detraction changes the whole impact of the passage: it tells against the procurator instead of the governor.

The bias displayed by Tacitus against the procurators is not as readily explicable as his hostility towards Polyclitus. Certainly Classicianus came from the same sound equestrian background as Tacitus himself. Was Tacitus too uncritical of biased senatorial source material (perhaps the memoirs of Suetonius Paulinus himself)? Had he absorbed too fondly the prejudices of the senatorial milieu? Did Suetonius' connection with Tacitus' family so prejudice the historian in his favour that Tacitus was convinced, in spite of the facts, that the debacle of Boudicca's rebellion and its aftermath must have been the fault of the procurators? None of this explains adequately the implicit (and quite gratuitous) detraction of Catus' efforts on behalf of the colonists at *Annals* XIV.32.2 or the elaboration of *Annals* XIV.38.3. More evidence about Tacitus' attitude to governors and procurators is needed before an explanation can be attempted.

72. Ogilvie, op. cit., 201, note on 16.3.
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