THE GEOGRAPHIC DEFINITION OF *ULTIMUS*
FROM JULIUS CAESAR TO DOMITIAN

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ABSTRACT
From the time of Julius Caesar until the end of the first century AD, the adjective *ultimus* took on a very political meaning, particularly when used by the poets of the age. It defines the extent of the Roman empire, being used for many of the boundaries of empire. Applied to Britain by Catullus, the word soon fell out of use with the island, especially after the invasion of Claudius. The appearance of this adjective should cause the reader to consider the extent of the empire at the time the work was written, since many passages seem linked to expansionist imperial policy. This is particularly true of the Augustan poets, who promoted the plans of the new emperor. By the time of Domitian, writers employed *ultimus* in a variety of ways to delineate the empire.

Ancient writers often used the adjective *ultimus* to define the extent of the Roman Empire in geographic terms. In many cases, there appears to be a direct political context (the poet is promoting imperial policy) for this word, especially among the Augustan poets and the poet of the *Laus Caesaris*. Although *ultimus* frequently describes Britain during the first century BC, an examination of sources from the time of Julius Caesar to Domitian indicates numerous references to the East and Africa. Claudius’ invasion of Britain returned the island to prominence, but *ultimus* appears to be an eastern allusion, especially after Vespasian’s rise to power. There is little doubt that each author had a specific reason for employing *ultimus*: the context and tone of relevant passages are examined here.

Fordyce calls *ultimus* a stock epithet for Britain.¹ This may be true for Catullus, who uses it three times to refer to the island.² Catullus was undoubtedly influenced by the campaigns of Julius Caesar, particularly in 11.10, where the poet uses the phrase *monimenta Caesaris* before the reference to Britain. In this poem, he has recited a catalogue of the distant parts of Empire, a common motif in poetry, incorporating the Indians, Parthians

² Cat. Carm. 11.11-12 (*ulti- / mosque Britannos*), 29.4 (*ultima Britannia*) and 29.12 (*ultima insula*).
and Arabs for the East. It is interesting that these tend to be for specific peoples, while the Britons are the only western people mentioned, the emphasis shifting to the physical features of the land (the Rhine, the Alps and Ocean). By using the tribal names, the poet may be distinguishing the eastern peoples as not yet part of the Empire. Geographical features may indicate those already under Roman control.

Catullus uses *ultimus* in reference to Tethys: *suscipit, o Gelli, quantum non ultima Tethys / nec genitor nympharum abluit Oceanus ...* (88.5-6). This deity may be synonymous with Britain. She is mentioned in the *Laus Caesaris* (426.9) and clearly is connected by that poet with the island, but without the epithet of *ultimus*, perhaps indicative of Claudius’ bringing Britain into the Empire (see below for more on the *Laus Caesaris*). Catullus has joined Tethys with Ocean, providing a watery image, which may well have been associated by Romans with Britain because of Caesar’s campaigns.

Britain appears several times in the poetry written during the reign of Augustus, although the emperor did not invade the island. Horace writes: *serves iturum Caesarem in ultimos / orbis Britannos et iuvenum recens / examen Eois timendum / partibus Oceanique rubro.* This is clearly praise for the emperor Augustus, anticipating a possible invasion, while also suggesting campaigns in the east (*Eois* in line 31 and *Oceanique rubro* in 32). It has been suggested that Horace composed this poem prior to 25 BC, relating to the campaign of Aelius Gallus. If so, this links with the later passages from Dio Cassius about a possible invasion of the island. The combining of East and West in the one passage is common in Augustan poetry.

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3 See Thompson’s comment about the mixing of eastern names among Roman authors: J. O. Thompson, ‘Place names in Latin poetry’, *Latomus* 10 (1951) 435.
4 According to Dio Cassius, there were three separate plans for an invasion (49.38.2; 53.22.5 and 53.25.2), but nothing came of them.
5 *Hor. Carm.* 1.35.29-32: i.e. ‘Protect our Caesar, about to go to the farthest ends of the world against the Britons. Protect our new fresh group of young men, who shall raise fear in Eastern parts and the Red Sea.’
6 K. Quinn (ed.), *Horace: The Odes* (London 1980) 187-88. The joining of Britain and the East is not unusual. See *Ode* 1.21.15 and 3.5.2-4 and *Epode* 7.7-10. Propertius also combines the two, in 2.27.5-6 and 4.3.9-10, as does Virgil in *Eclogue* 1.64-66.
7 See, for example, *Hor. Epod.* 7.7-10, *Verg. Ecl.* 1.64-66 and Prop. 4.3.9-10. The emphasis on expansion throughout the empire is made by Augustus himself: *Rerum gestarum divi Augusti, quibus orbem terrarum imperio populi Romani subiecit ...* (RG, preface). It has been noted that Augustus explored and attacked many areas on the edge of the Roman empire, thus opening connections beyond the known world: C. Nicolet, *Space, Geography and Politics in the Early Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor 1991) 85-88. Nicolet also correctly observes (41) the use of
An Augustan connection between northern lands and *ultimus* occurs again in Virgil’s *Georgics*, where the poet writes: *an deus immensi venias maris ac tua nautae / numina sola colant, tibi serviat ultima Thule, / teque sibi generum Tethys emat omnibus undis* ... Wijsman has shown that Thule came to represent Britain after the conquest of Claudius. While it seems unlikely that Virgil saw the two as synonymous, it is possible the Roman people of the first century did not make a geographical distinction here. Thule was known around this time since Strabo (1.4.2) reports the evidence of Pytheas.

Romm has suggested that the *Georgics* passage was a cultural blank slate for Augustus, whose design was to take *imperium* beyond the western ocean (Thule being an embodiment of Ocean). This fits with Wells’ view of Augustus: “*Imperium sine fine dedi?* Augustus himself may well have believed it.” The Augustan poets supported the emperor’s desires to expand the empire, not just to Britain, but in all directions. The use of Thule in the *Georgics* provides a new and different appearance for Rome’s northern conquests, much in the way various tribes and rivers denote eastern opportunities for conquest.

The concept of warfare against Britain is also seen in Tibullus: *Te manet invictus Romano marte Britannus / teque interiecto mundi pars altera sole.* Although not using *ultimus*, the poet distinguishes Britain as being a separate entity, divided from the Roman world by Ocean. The choice of *invictus* shows that the campaigns of Julius Caesar were now supposed to be forgotten: Britain would be fresh territory whenever Augustus saw fit to attack. The victory at Actium signaled a new imperial policy, one where global expansion was seen as a normal part of Augustus’ autocratic rule.

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the globe on some coins of Augustus, confirming the comments of the poets.

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8 Verg. *Georg.* 1.29-31, i.e. ‘Whether you appear as god of the immense sea and sailors worship only you, while farthest Thule owns you and Tethys purchases you as a spouse for her daughter, with all the waves as dowry.’ The connection between Tethys and Ocean has been noted in Catullus, but here Virgil joins Tethys and Thule, which also appears in Sen. *Med.* 377-79.


12 Tib 3.7.149-50, i.e. ‘The Briton whom the Roman has not defeated in war is held for you, as well as the other part of the world, with the sun coming between.’

13 Romm (note 10) 136.
While not using ultimus, it is perhaps fair to say that Tibullus was stating that Britain was distant. It was certainly a separate world from the rest of the empire.

There are numerous instances, however, where the Augustan poets neglected ultimus when writing of Britain. Virgil says that Britain is divided from the rest of the world: toto divisos orbe Britannos. Horace also mentions Britain without ultimus in two passages: intactus aut Britannus ut descenderet / Sacra catenatus via ... and praesens divus habebitur / Augustus adiectis Britannia / imperio gravibusque Persis. There is little doubt that these passages are political in nature, promoting Augustus’ expansionist policy for both Britain and Parthia (called the Persians by Horace). Yet Horace does so without the use of ultimus. Propertius is more interested in the material goods coming from the island, as evidenced in esseda caelatis siste Britannia iugis ... The emphasis on chariots might well recall Caesar’s statements about the British war chariots. A second passage from Propertius illustrates the barbarity of the island: nunc etiam infectos demens inmitare Britannos, / ludis et externo tincta nitore capta. While neither poem is especially political, they both help in further defining the image of Britain at the time of Augustus.

It must also be noted that the Augustan poets did not exclusively view Britain as ultimus. Virgil uses ultimus for Africa (Aen. 4.481), Bactra (Aen. 8.687) and Thrace (Aen. 12.334-35) in passages which distinctly show the distance of these locations. Horace employs it in reference to Spain (Carm. 1.36.4), Africa (Carm. 2.18.4-5) and the eastern Geloni (Carm. 2.20.18-19). Propertius uses the word once in connection with the East (3.43.). These passages indicate that the poets at this time saw all boundaries of the empire as ultimus, not merely the island of Britain.

The poet of Claudius’ Laus Caesaris utilises ultimus indirectly with Britain. He writes: ultima cingebat Thybris tua, Romule, regna ..., emphasising the growth of Rome since the time of Romulus. By concluding

14 Verg. Ecl. 1.66.
15 Hor. Epod. 7.7-8: i.e., ‘...or that a Briton, as yet unbeaten, might walk the Sacred Way in chains.’
16 Hor. Carm. 3.5.2-4: i.e., ‘Augustus shall be thought a god on earth when he has added the Britons and the dire Persians to our Empire.’
17 Prop. 2.1.76: i.e., ‘Stop your British with the curved harness.’ It has been noted that British chariots were a Roman pleasure vehicle, appealing to Propertius’ theme: W. A. Camps (ed.), Propertius: Elegies: Book II (Cambridge 1967) 77.
18 Caes. B. Gall. 4.24; 5.15 and 5.19.
19 Prop. 2.18.22-23: i.e., ‘Do you still wildly seek to copy the painted British and do you play, your head bathed with foreign colours?’
20 423.1: i.e., ‘Romulus, your Tiber used to surround the farthest parts of your kingdom ...’
this poem with the line *pars est imperii, terminus ante fuit*, the poet accomplishes two things.\(^{21}\) First, he shows the relationship of Ocean to the Roman Empire, illustrating the change that has occurred since the time of Romulus. He also demonstrates that Claudius has brought Rome’s *imperium* to the farthest parts of the world.\(^{22}\) The emperor had broken the barrier of Ocean, which had limited Roman expansion until that time, and created, in Virgil’s words, *imperium sine fine* (*Aen* 1.279). Romulus has been replaced by Claudius (who is not named in the poem), Rome’s kingdom has been replaced by her empire, and there are no limits to her extent of power, whereas, in the beginning, the Tiber had served as the boundary. This poem also places Claudius above his illustrious predecessors, Augustus and Julius Caesar, because he had defeated Britain and added it to Rome’s domains. In many ways, this poem shows the dramatic change since the time of Augustus regarding Britain’s place in Roman affairs.

The second appearance of *ultimus* in the *Laus Caesaris* provides an indication of Roman (or at least Claudian’s) belief: *sed citra nostrum flectitur imperium. / Ultima cesserunt adaperto claustra profundo / et iam Romano cingimur Oceano.*\(^{23}\) This follows the theme presented in poem 423, that of Claudius extending Roman control beyond Ocean. The island itself was not seen as *ultimus*, but Ocean had been the farthest boundary. Now that Claudius had triumphed, however, neither the sea nor land were distant, as they had been made Roman. The juxtaposition of *imperium* (end of line 4) and *ultima* (start of line 5) also seems significant: it is not only the sea which is distant, but Rome’s domination has been extended to distant lands, a common theme in Augustan poetry, as noted above.

The *Laus Caesaris* seems to recognise lands beyond Britain, by the choice of several words for northern lands: *brumalem* and *frigida* (both in 426.5) and *Arctos* (in 421.1 and 426.6). This leads into the problem of the Orkneys presented by Eutropius (7.13.2-3).\(^{24}\) The work of Pomponius Mela and Pliny both show a familiarity with the lands north of Britain, possibly indicating Roman influence and control over these lands. The terms are vague

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\(^{21}\) 423.6.; i.e., ‘It (Ocean) was the end of Empire, but now it is part of Empire.’

\(^{22}\) For the connection between Ocean, Britain and Rome’s *imperium*, see D. Braund, *Ruling Roman Britain* (London 1996) 10-23. For specific comments on this particular poem, see Braund 106-07.

\(^{23}\) 424.4-6; i.e., ‘The sun now bends its path short of our empire. The final barriers have now yielded to the sea which has now been opened and we are surrounded by a Roman Ocean.’

\(^{24}\) For arguments on this, see C. Stevens, ‘Claudius and the *Orcades*,’ *CR* 1 (1951) 7-9 and A. Galimberti, ‘La spedizione in Britannia del 43 d.C. e il problema delle Orcadi’, *Aevum* 70 (1996) 69-74.
enough to be interpreted differently, but the idea of at least exploration and contact with the northern islands during the reign of Claudius must be a possibility.

At this point, the word *Britannia* almost disappears from literature, replaced by *Thule* (see note 5 and the Wijman article). Pomponius Mela, writing during Claudius’ principate, refers to it twice (2.105.3 and 3.57.1). This is not surprising, since the emperor placed a large emphasis on his military success in Britain. Seneca writes: ... *Indus gelidum / potat Araxen, Albin Perae / Rhenumque bibant – venient annis / saecula seris, quibus Oceanus / vincula rerum laxet et ingens / pateat tellus Tethysque novos / deterget orbes nec sit terris / ultima Thule.*

This passage recalls the catalogues from the Augustan poet. Water is the key image here, with the Indus, Araxes, Rhine and Ocean all noted before the shift to Thule. Here, Seneca delineates the extent of empire at the time he wrote the *Medea*. While not as overtly political as Horace’s *Odes* or the works of Virgil, this helps set the extent of empire and Roman knowledge of the world.

During the reign of the Flavians, Thule became a popular term, appearing in such diverse writers as Pliny (*HN* 2.187; 2.246 and 4.104), Tacitus (*Agr. 10*), Statius (*Silv.* 3.5.20; 4.4.62; 5.1.90 and 5.2.55), Silius Italicus (*Pun.* 3.597 and 17.416) and Juvenal (15.112). Only Pliny (in 4.104) describes Thule as *ultimus*, suggesting that Thule (and by implication, Britain) had become too well known among the Romans because of the campaigns of men such as Cerialis, Frontinus and Agricola. Rome had extended her *imperium* beyond Ocean, so these lands that were now a part of empire did not need

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25 Sen. Med. 372-79, i.e. ‘The Indian drinks cold Araxes, while the Persian partakes of the Elbe and Rhine. An age shall come in the future when Ocean shall relax the chains and the wide earth shall lie exposed and Tethys shall point out new lands while Thule shall not be the limit of the lands.’

26 Seneca knew a fair bit about Britain, as evidenced by both *Britannii* and *Brigantia* in *Apocol.* 12.13-17. Braund (note 22), 125-26 notes that this use is unusual, suggesting either a distinction between northern and southern Britain or a mistaken meaning for the Brigantes. Seneca may have been aware of the troubles in Brigantia in the mid-50s (*Tac. Ann.* 12.40) and played upon this here. Seneca also had monetary interests in Britain, since Dio states that the recall of his loans caused the revolt of Boudica (*Dio Cass.* 62.2.1). Such a loan would hardly have been made without some knowledge of the people.

27 C.D.N. Costa (ed.), *Seneca: Medea* (Oxford 1973) 107. Costa notes the Romans knew the earth was larger than previously thought. Thule was the northernmost land known, possibly Iceland or Norway.

28 Pliny’s use of *ultimus* in 4.104 is perhaps best explained since he here provides a fairly detailed description of Britain and the lands to the north. In this context, Thule was certainly distinct from Britain and was also the most distant of the lands he described.
exotic terms for their northern boundaries.

Both Pliny and Tacitus provided geographical surveys of the North when they wrote of Thule. Pliny's account was especially detailed, with extensive knowledge of the island groups north of Scotland, contradicting Tacitus' claim that the Orkneys were unknown until the time of Agricola. Tacitus' aim was clear: to elevate his father-in-law to the highest level. By describing northern Britain in such bleak terms, he furnished an image suitable for attaining this goal with his audience.

Statius, like Tacitus, wrote in praise of a commander, in this case, M. Vettius Bolanus, governor of Britain from 69 to 71. There is specific praise for Bolanus' campaigns in Scotland (Silv. 5.2.142-49), although the actual extent of his campaigns has been questioned. Statius wrote the Silvae in the early 90s, when the conquest of Britain was topical and geographic allusions to places such as Caledonia and Thule should be expected. While not necessarily advocating continued expansion, Flavian authors, especially those writing during Domitian's reign, probably recognised the need to flatter the emperor with these statements of praise for his accomplishments.

An example of this is the Juvenal passage noted above, where he writes: Gallia causidicos docuit facunda Britannos, / de conducendo loquitur iam rhetore Thyle (15.111-12). Here is a clear distinction between Britain and Thule, yet Juvenal indicates that both are under Roman influence. Such statements glorify the Flavians' addition of Britain into empire, even though the author's accuracy might be questioned in view of the archaeological evidence. While Agricola's campaigns extended into Scotland, few would claim that he defeated the whole island, since most evidence only exists south of the Moray Firth.

While the Flavian writers clearly stressed British geographical locations, the absence of ultimus from these passages is significant. It demonstrates the change in attitude towards the northern boundaries of the empire. The idea that ultimus was a stock epithet for Britain does not hold up, certainly by the time of the Flavians. In fact, it can be shown that ancient authors applied this adjective to many areas besides Britain from the time of Julius Caesar to Domitian.

Caesar himself writes of ultimas Germanorum nationes (B. Gall. 4.16.7), in a passage designed to show the extent of German territory to his

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30 Caledonia appears in Flavian authors such as Florus (1.45), Martial (Spect. 7.3) and Silius Italicus (Pun. 3.597-98).
readers. It is interesting that in his descriptions of Britain, he does not apply this word to the land, but as Romm has pointed out, many writers of the late republic emphasised the northern coast of Germany as the major northern boundary. It should also be noted that the German tribes posed a greater threat to Rome than those in Britain: it is therefore not surprising that Caesar sought to distinguish them by his choice of words. Caesar may also have chosen his vocabulary for political reasons: his exploits in Britain were known without adding much fanfare. Had he used *ultimus*, he may have reminded his enemies of extending his *imperium* beyond his allotted territory. Expeditions into Germany could be easily defended: the British campaign might have been more difficult to justify.

Cicero employs *ultimus* usually in an eastern context, even though his brother served with Caesar in Britain (e.g. *Q. Fr.* 2.15.2 and 2.16.4). In the second Verrine oration, he uses *ultimus* to describe Phrygia (1.154.1) and Syria (5.157.15), while in the *De Provinciis Consularibus*, he uses the phrase *ultimum Pontum* (31.5). These are definitely eastern allusions, but Gaul is also given this epithet, especially in the *Philippics* (2.48; 5.5; 5.37 and 13.37). Cicero’s work is political by nature, but not to the same extent as the poetry of Horace, for example, who promotes a specific policy for Augustus. The allusions in the *Philippics* perhaps give a clearer indication of Roman perceptions of *ultimus* after Caesar’s death: the end of empire was seen at the coast of Gaul. That land, therefore, was seen as *ultimus*.

As already noted, the Augustan poets did not use *ultimus* exclusively for Britain: this continued with Julio-Claudian and Flavian writers. In the *Pharsalia*, Lucan stresses an eastern context with the word (3.165 and 8.226), with one reference to Africa (10.273-74). Pliny employs *ultimus* three times for the East in the *Natural Histories* (4.88; 6.78 and 7.99). This more than balances his *ultima Thule* at 4.104 (see above). This section demonstrates Pliny’s knowledge of northern geography: his terminology should perhaps be seen as a standard for the Flavian period. In this case, Thule, as distinct from Britain, was *ultimus* in Roman eyes.

*Ultimus* appears in Statius in very general terms (*ultimus orbis* in *Silv.* 5.1.90). This description is followed in the next line by *Thyle*, so the possibility of a connection exists. However, Statius could well mean the empire as a whole, with the choice of *orbis* indicating an unspecific site. All extents of empire were remote, and Thule was merely one of these areas which merited recognition in the passage. The work as a whole is political, coming as it does

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31 Romm (note 10) 122.
during Domitian’s reign, so a broad definition of *ultimus* may suit both writer and emperor.

An eastern context is also seen in Quintus Curtius Rufus’ history: at 9.2.8, he writes of peoples on the edges of the earth. This may recall Caesar’s German tribes, but, in the context of Alexander, it clearly relates to India and the East, the farthest extent of Alexander’s march. At 9.10.12, the reference is much clearer, speaking of the remotest parts of the Orient. Alexander’s campaigns were important in Roman eyes, since their empire rivaled his. Curtius Rufus must refer to the East when he uses *ultimus*, but it perhaps enforces a standard practice used by other writers before him.

*Ultimus* is, therefore, both a geographical and political word: there is certainly a connection with Britain from the campaigns of Julius Caesar until Augustus’ consolidation of power. From that point through the end of Domitian’s reign, it is used extensively with many parts of the empire, setting out the bounds of empire. While it is used frequently with Thule, there is a more general connection to eastern boundaries. It is therefore perhaps best to see this adjective in a generic, but also political sense, as a reference to the extent of the Roman empire when each author used the word.
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