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**The Ancient Britons and the Roman Invasions 55BC-  
61AD: An Analysis of Tribal Resistance and  
Response.**

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**December 2003.**

**A thesis submitted towards the degree of Master of Arts of Massey  
University.**

## **ABSTRACT.**

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the response to the Roman invasions of 55BC to 61AD from the tribal groupings of southern Britain. Much has been written of the activities of the Roman commanders and soldiers, but this thesis looks to analyse this period of invasion from the position of the tribes of southern Britain.

The opening chapters will provide a descriptive account of the land and people who occupied southern Britain and a survey of tribal response to the Roman invasions. The reasons behind the differing responses to Rome will be offered with an analysis of the tribal politics that existed in southern Britain between Caesar's invasions of 55-54BC and the Claudian invasion of 43AD.

Three case studies consider the central response to the Roman incursions. The first looks at the resistance offered to Caesar by the British warlord Cassivellaunus. The second case study highlights the initial response to Rome in 43AD by Caratacus and his brother Togodumnus. Following the initial fighting to stop the Roman invasion, Caratacus moved westward to carry on resistance to Rome in Wales. This thesis will follow those steps and will discuss the next stage of Caratacus' response. The third case study explores the Icenic revolt of 60AD under the warrior queen Boudicca.

The case studies allow comparisons between three periods of military response. Analysis of these three case studies enables the identification of a British tribal style of fighting while discussing the successes and failures of these tactics.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.**

No one person achieves anything without support from those around him or her. I have been extremely privileged by having immense support in this project.

Firstly I wish to thank my partner Zenaida, who has been a tower of strength and amazing in her support of this project and me. I also thank our two daughters who have been driving forces in their own unique ways.

I wish to extend gratitude to both my sets of parents, Joy and Alan Papprell, Richard and Jeannine Bradley and close family, who have always shown total support.

I also extend respect and thanks to my supervisor, Dr John Tonkin-Covell. I give my appreciation to Dr Glyn Harper and General Piers Reid (Retired) for allowing me to explore warfare in Iron Age Britain. I would also like to thank Mr Rex Volkerling, Mr Paul Stichbury, Dr Jeff Sluka, Dr Chris Dixon, Mr Basil Poff and Dr Norman Austin for enthusiasm, encouragement and inspiration.

Finally I thank (RSM, SP, GM, NC, JD, RMJM, DB, P&DH, MM, PWA, P&MB, NH) who have offered inspiration and support throughout.

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## INTRODUCTION

*'Not much of the summer was now left, and winter sets in early in these regions because all this side of Gaul faces north. Nevertheless I went ahead with plans for an expedition to Britain. I knew that in nearly all our campaigns in Gaul, help had come to the enemy from Britain.'* Caesar.<sup>1</sup>

With these words Gaius Julius Caesar opened the chapter in his *War Commentaries* accounting for the first invasion of Britain. This incursion would bring the tribal peoples of Britain into contact with the Roman war machine.

The aim of this thesis is to explore Iron Age British military response to Roman invasion. The period covered in this thesis is from 56BC, when British tribal warriors crossed the Channel to support Gallic tribes of Armorica in their resistance to Gaius Julius Caesar prior to his first move into Britain, and finishes in 60AD when, after seventeen years of Roman rule, the client kingdom of the Iceni and other tribes rose in revolt under the leadership of Boudicca.

Between 56BC and 60AD the tribes of Britain went through a series of political and economic changes that had an impact on their ability to respond to Roman invasion. Caesar's moves into Gaul and his invasion of Britain in 55BC is a point in history where British tribal response to Rome began.

The military response to Caesar and then the tactics used against the Claudian invasion of 43AD are well attested and provide historical details from which to draw comparisons while identifying British tribal fighting styles. The rebellion of 60AD led by Boudicca also offers an example of Iron Age warfare used in Britain against the Roman administrative authority.

Caesar's observation that British warriors seemed to give aid to the Gauls in all his campaigns became one of the reasons for crossing the Channel, in an attempt to punish these British warriors while undertaking a reconnaissance of the western boundary of the known world.<sup>2</sup>

The prospect of warriors from Britain helping Gallic tribes highlights an environment of cross-Channel contact. This has given strength to the idea put forward by some scholars of pan-tribal/Celtic resistance to Rome and this assumption will be questioned within this thesis.<sup>3</sup>

Following Caesar's raids and withdrawal, southeast Britain moved towards forms of statehood and powerful tribal dynasties emerged that dominated most of southeast Britain. By the middle of the first century AD, the Emperor Claudius launched a full-scale invasion of Britain, which was followed by the swift submission of the tribes in the southeast and the start of a process of Romanisation. Resistance to invasion continued in the west and in 60AD the province was rocked by a bloody revolt. The submission of this rebellion effectively ended resistance by Iron Age Britons in the southeast.

The classical Roman historians dedicated much written text to the people who lived to the north of the Italian peninsula. Caesar wrote on the Iron Age Europeans that he came across as he invaded Gaul and Britain. The people he found there left no written history of their own and thus accounts of ancient western European history was written by Romans and Greeks who saw the Iron Age people of western Europe primarily as a military threat while also viewing their proximity to the classical world.

Caesar's war commentaries are unique in the sense that they introduced written accounts of the Gallic and, more important to this thesis, the British styles of warfare from a Roman commander's perspective. The works of Cassius Dio



and Tacitus describe Britain at the time of the Claudian invasion and during the reign of Nero.<sup>4</sup> Suetonius' work on the twelve Caesars gives an insight into the attitudes of the Romans and their rulers with regard to the people of Iron Age Britain, while highlighting events that shaped frontier policies in the west.<sup>5</sup>

The scope of this thesis is to look at how the Iron Age people of Britain responded to Roman invasion and not how the Romans fought these tribal people on their western frontier. While one would expect a degree of bias from these classical writers, their accounts do provide insights into the tribal peoples and their attitudes at a time of invasion and conquest. The classical writers provide a base of primary sources for this thesis.

Modern historical scholarship on Iron Age society have used other disciplines to gain a clearer understanding of ancient Britain while also enabling scholars to confirm or refute some of the long accepted classical accounts. Archaeological evidence and findings have been used in researching the topic and themes of this thesis.

Prominent archaeologists such as Barry Cunliffe and John Wachter have provided a vast wealth of information on the period covered within this work along with other scholars in this field. Cunliffe, in his book *Iron Age Communities in Britain*, has given the field of Iron Age study an invaluable piece of work on the communities of this period.<sup>6</sup> Wachter has done much work on Roman Britain and covers the period when the tribal groups fought to resist invasion.<sup>7</sup>

Historians in the fields of ancient and Celtic studies have also provided much useful material and analysis on the period, such as Peter Beresford Ellis, Lloyd and Jennifer Laing, Graham Webster, John Peddie, and Ian Richmond.<sup>8</sup>

Webster in particular has done invaluable work on the invasion period and the resistance to Roman incursions.

Webster's three volume series, *The Roman Invasion of Britain, Rome against Caratacus and Boudica: The British revolt against Rome AD60*, provide a sound base on which to build the three case studies used in this thesis to analyse the Iron Age responses to the Roman invasions of 55 and 54BC and 43AD.<sup>9</sup>

Peddie provided a historical and military complement to the works of Wachter and focused on the Roman army, the invasion and logistical element to the invasions undertaken by Caesar and then under Claudius.<sup>10</sup> Like Caesar, Peddie writes with the insight of a soldier. The discipline of historical geography and linguistics have also provided information in helping to create a clearer and broader picture of Iron Age Britain at the time of Roman invasion.

For the purpose of this thesis the peoples of Iron Age Britain will be called Britons, or, when necessary, by their tribal names. The geographical area they lived in will be called Britain. These people lived in the areas of ancient Britain that are now modern Wales and the south and southeast of England. The northern border of this geographical area cuts from the Trent River across to the Mersey, down the western coast of Wales in the west and from the Trent in the east to Land's End.

To begin with, there will be a brief survey of the British people prior to Caesar's raids and a look at the geo-political map of southeast Britain that evolved up to the invasion of 43AD. The social fabric of the Britons will be discussed and its importance to their ability to wage war against the Romans. The social hierarchy and the roles members played within the tribal framework will also be discussed in the first chapter.

The geographical environment was important for sustaining tribal populations and therefore equally important for the provision of warriors and the conduct of military

campaigns. The geographical environment is one of the constants of any theatre of war and had a huge impact on the way the Britons fought. The impact and its relationship to the style of tribal warfare used will be discussed.

A brief survey of the physical make-up of the British warrior will be given to identify how Iron Age Britons fought and the equipment they used. This survey will draw on both classical accounts and the findings from archaeological excavations, while also looking at the images left on stone and bronze-work dedication plaques, coinage and monuments.

Response to Roman invasion will be analysed on a tribe-by-tribe basis while noting the existence of tribal confederations employed to resist Rome and to gauge the success or failure of such arrangements. This study will look at tribal resistance with a view to establishing the extent to which responses varied. The motivations and influencing factors such as tribal survival or economic necessity in tribal decision-making with regard to their response will be discussed and analysed, testing the notion of pan-tribal/Celtic resistance to Roman invasion.

Much work has been done on the Romans and their quest for domination of the known world. Within this period, from the control of Italy and the Mediterranean to the conquest of Gaul and south eastern Britain, hundreds of independent tribal groups and peoples lived and their passing is often recorded with nothing more than a few lines in a classical account of a prominent Roman of the time. Other classical accounts are the words of writers who looked at the peoples of Iron Age Europe with distinctly Mediterranean and sometimes-hostile eyes. This thesis will seek to highlight Iron Age British military responses to the Roman invasion by analysing the events, actions and motivations of these tribal peoples.

The period between 56BC and 60AD was a time of conquest and resistance and three case studies will be used to explore, in more detail, British resistance to Roman invasion. The campaigns of Cassivellaunus in 54BC, Caratacus in 43-51AD and the Iceni revolt led by Boudicca in 60AD will be used to compare military response while also identifying military tactics and leadership qualities and fighting style.

The first case study looks at Cassivellaunus who led a tribal confederation of Britons against Caesar in 54BC and classical accounts have left much that can be scrutinised to show the fighting style of the tribal warriors and Cassivellaunus' leadership. This first case study will explore the use of the natural surroundings by Cassivellaunus while identifying his method of war and response, with some focus on the use of the chariot and deployment. The accounts Caesar left of his raids into Britain will be drawn on while also considering archaeological evidence and the work of ancient, Iron Age and Celtic scholars to research this period of initial Roman military contact and response.

The second case study has two components; the first covers the invasion of 43AD and the tribal responses to it under the leadership of Caratacus and his brother Togodumnus. The second follows the campaign of Caratacus who was forced into the west after the quick fall of the southeast to the Romans. Webster's works on this period will be utilised, along with analysis of the classical writers. Tacitus, Cassius Dio and Suetonius will be referred to in covering the second phase of Britain's incorporation into the Roman Empire.

In this second case study, the first component begins with a brief introduction to the geo-political map of southeastern Britain with particular reference to the Catuvellauni. It will also provide some detailed observations on the dynastic

politics of the Catuvellaunian chief, Cunobelin and the resistance offered by his two sons Caratacus and Togodumnus. Analysis of the tactics used by these two chiefs will be followed by an account of their defence of the river Medway and the problems of leading a confederated tribal army.

The second part traces Caratacus' retreat to the west and his further resistance that drew the Welsh tribes into military contact with the Roman invaders. An analysis of Caratacus' fighting style will be followed by a summing up of his successes and failures.

The third case study deals with the Iceni revolt of 60AD that saw the Roman province attacked by a confederation of tribal war bands under the Icenian queen Boudicca. The background and reasons for the revolt will be discussed along with the series of events that unfolded. The tactics used and their successes and failures will be analysed while a survey of the effect the revolt had on the province will be given.

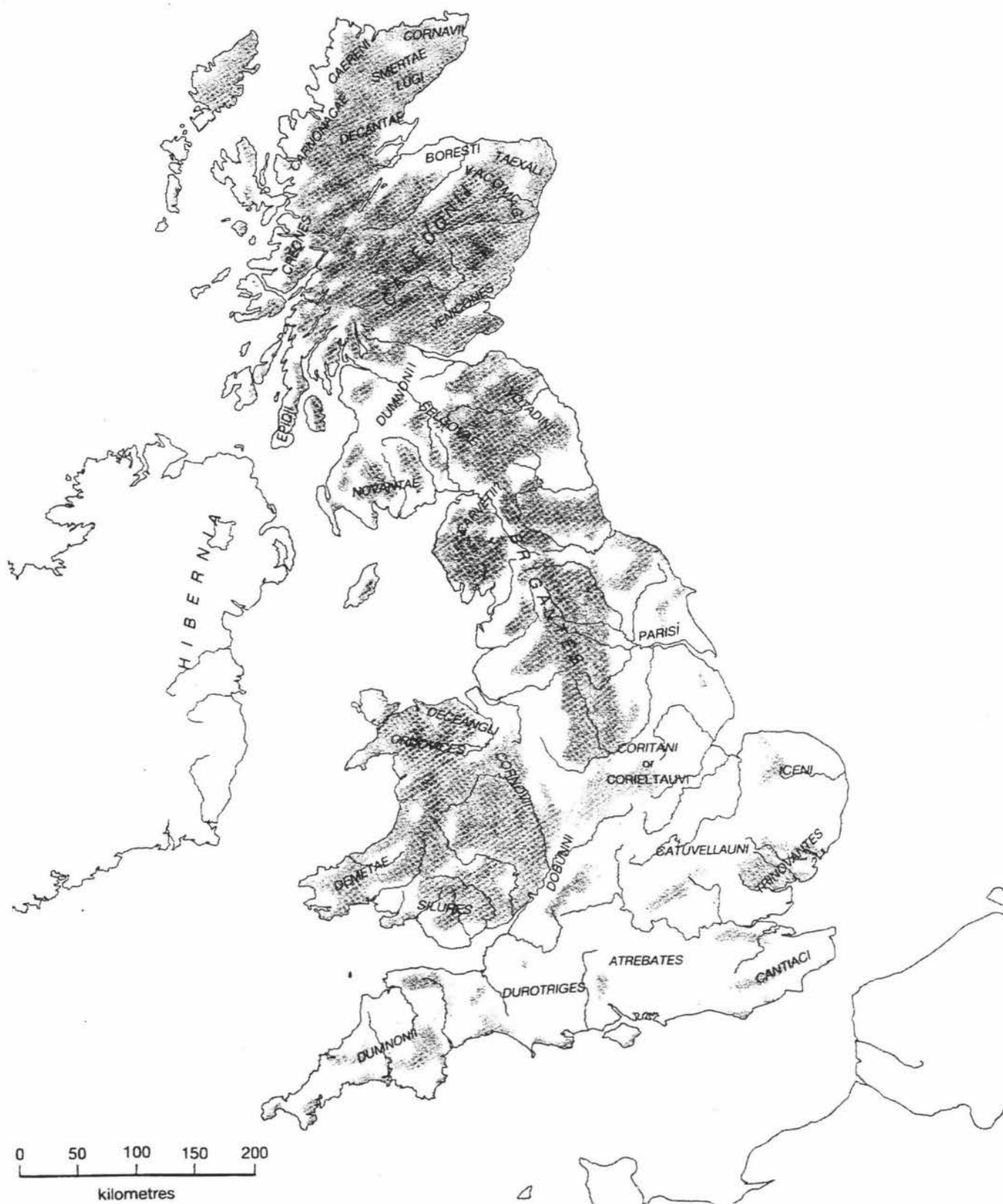
Again, Tacitus and Dio have left accounts of the Boudiccan revolt, which provide contemporary commentary on an event that shook the new Roman province. Their accounts assist in establishing the nature of the military response by the various tribal groups during the last stage of the Roman invasion and stabilisation of the southeast. The tactics used in 60AD and the final battle that drew the Boudiccan revolt to a close will be compared with the tactics and fighting styles of the previous case studies. This will provide comparisons to determine whether there was a continuation and development of British tactical skill, or a departure from what had gone before.

The conclusion will analyse the period of resistance to Roman invasion. It will present the findings of the questions raised in this thesis, while identifying commonality or

differences in the responses, attitudes and motivations in dealing with the Roman invasion of Britain. The conclusion will attempt to identify a common fighting style within the tribal armies and leadership.

Using the accounts of classical scholars is problematic as their views were those of outsiders concerning the social functions and activities of the tribal peoples of Iron Age Britain. With the aid of archaeology and historical geography however, these classical sources are useful starting points from which to begin analysis of tribal response to military attacks from without.

Caesar's account of his raids on Britain provides its first recorded military leader in Cassivellaunus; it also gives first hand information on the socio-political make-up of southeast Britain. Archaeological evidence has supported a lot of what Caesar wrote and has influenced scholarship up to the present time.



Map 1. Tribes of Britain in the first century AD. (From B. Jones & D. Mattingly. *An Atlas of Roman Britain*. London, Basil Blackwell Ltd. 1990 p 45.)

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Reference Notes, Introduction.

<sup>1</sup> Caesar. *War Commentaries of Caesar*. Translated by R. Warner. New York, Mentor Books. 1960, Book IV, 2.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Some scholarship uses emotive language to offer reasons of kin-ties to explain the presence of British warriors fighting in Gaul. See P. B. Ellis *Caesar's Invasion of Britain*. London, Orbis Publishing. 1978 p. 10. Peddie refers to the Gauls as 'continental cousins' See J. Peddie *Conquest: The Roman Invasion of Britain*. Gloucestershire, Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd. 1997, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example C. Dio *Dio's Roman History: Volume I-VIII*. London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1961. Tacitus. *The Annals and the Histories*. Translated by A.J. Church & W.J. Brodribb. New York, Washington Square Press. 1964.

<sup>5</sup> G. Suetonius. *The Twelve Caesars*. Translated by R. Graves. London, Penguin Group. 1979.

<sup>6</sup> B. Cunliffe. *Iron Age Communities in Britain: An Account of England, Scotland and Wales from the Seventh Century BC until the Roman Conquest*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 1975. Cunliffe has released more works on this period. See Bibliography for a full listing of his other works.

<sup>7</sup> J. Wachter. *The Coming of Rome*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 1979. See Bibliography for a full listing of his works.

<sup>8</sup> See secondary sources in this work's bibliography.

<sup>9</sup> G. Webster. *Rome against Caratacus*. London, B.T. Batsford Ltd. 1981. *The Roman Invasion of Britain*. New Jersey, Barnes & Noble Books. 1980. *Boudica: The British Revolt against Rome AD60*. London, B.T. Batsford Ltd. 1978. See Bibliography for a full listing of his works.

<sup>10</sup> Peddie. 1997.