

The background of the cover is a blue-toned image. On the right side, there is a profile of a Roman soldier's helmet, showing its crest and facial mask. The background behind the helmet is a map of the British Isles, with labels like 'BRITANNIA' and 'EMPIRE' visible. The overall color scheme is monochromatic blue with yellow text.

THE ROMAN INVASION OF BRITAIN

A VIEWER'S GUIDE

Athenä:

Questions to Consider

1. In the near century between the invasions of Julius Caesar and Claudius, Rome had access to Britain's resources through trade. Considering the unintended consequences of the conquest, do you think invasion was ultimately a good idea for the Roman empire? Why or why not?
2. In retrospect, would Rome have had more success if it had treated the Celtic tribes differently after the conquest, or were revolts like Boudicca's inevitable?
3. Bettany Hughes notes that imperialism such as Rome's is now considered a "moral crime." Do you agree? Can you imagine circumstances in which it is justifiable?
4. What do you consider to be the most important legacies of the Roman conquest?

THE FAILED INVASIONS

If at first the Romans didn't succeed, they tried and tried again

As Bettany Hughes notes, Claudius wasn't the first Roman leader to invade Britain. Nearly 100 years earlier, Julius Caesar—fresh off his conquest of Gaul—tried not once, but twice. He came, he saw, he went home.

The first attempt came in 55 BCE. Fearing the tribes in Britain would fuel resistance among their fellow Celts in newly subjugated Gaul, Caesar led two legions of men to the coast of Kent. The Celtic warriors amassed along the shore looked so fierce that even the battle-hardened vets of the Gallic campaign at first



Julius Caesar, Nicolas Coustou, 1696

refused to disembark from their boats. Finally, one brave soldier leapt into the water to lead the charge, and the Romans established a beachhead. But storms threatened reinforcements and supplies, forcing them to withdraw.

Caesar returned the next year and fared little better. King Cassivellaunus, leader of the Catuvellauni, united with rival Celtic tribes and waged a tough guerilla campaign against the Romans invaders. Eventually, however, the ferocity of Caesar's legions and cavalry forced them to retreat. The Celtic forces quickly abandoned their tenuous alliances and individual tribal leaders began making peace overtures to Caesar. Cassivellaunus—recognizing that he had been bested—negotiated peace on easy terms, promising an annual tribute to Rome and turning over a few hostages as insurance. Caesar accepted, happy to leave those lands. He went back to Gaul and later spin-doctored his near defeat into a smashing success to burnish his image. Meanwhile, Cassivellaunus probably never paid his promised tributes, and the Celts' lives returned to normal—which meant fighting among themselves.

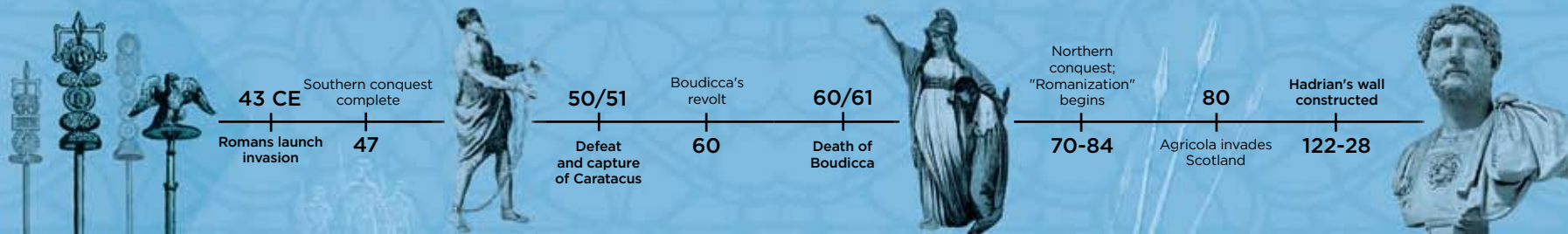
Much later, the emperors Augustus and Caligula also considered invading Britain, but internal political problems scuttled their plans. Ironically, in 43 CE, Claudius saw an invasion as the answer to—not a distraction from—his problems at home.

EQUIPPED FOR CONQUEST

Rome invaded Britain with the world's finest fighting force—rigorously trained, highly disciplined, and superbly equipped. Although the average Roman soldier stood only about 5 feet 7 inches, he could march 20 miles a day carrying over 40 pounds of gear, plus weapons. And he went into combat well armed and well armored.

Helmet: By the mid-1st century, bronze and iron headgear included flaps to protect the cheeks and ears.

Body armor: By the time of Claudius's invasion of Britain, Roman legionaries were wearing articulated-plate armor, which probably replaced solid-metal breastplates or heavy chainmail for the Roman occupiers. Rivets secured the overlapping plates to leather straps on the inside. Hinged in the back, the armor wrapped around the torso and closed in the front with buckles or hooks.



Greave: Soldiers usually wore a single metal shin guard to protect the leg exposed in battle.

Shield: Tall and curved like a section of an oil drum, the rectangular shield (or *scutum*) was made of tough, laminated wood or wickerwork, covered in leather, and rimmed with metal or rawhide.

Javelin: Called a *pilum*, each legionary carried two of these seven-foot spears. On attack, the Romans would rain down javelins before engaging the enemy. A wooden dowel held the metal point to the shaft; the dowel broke upon impact, dislodging the point so the enemy couldn't throw the javelin back.

Sword: A little over two feet long, the short sword known as a *gladius* proved ideal for stabbing and slashing in close combat. The Celts' longer swords, which required more room to maneuver, put them at a disadvantage against the invaders.

After the shock and awe of a javelin attack, Roman infantrymen mowed down Britons in hand-to-hand combat. Well protected by their large shields and marching in tight formation, the Romans must have seemed almost unbeatable in pitched battle.

THE FIRST CELTIC WAR MACHINE

The Celtic tribes fought against the Romans not only with swords, spears, and shields, but also with chariots. Although chariots had become outdated military technology elsewhere in the world as early as Julius Caesar's invasions, the Celts used them with surprising success.

Usually drawn by a pair of horses, the typical Celtic chariot was little more than a simple cart, open in the front and back. Roughly the size of a modern subcompact car, it had two wood-spoked wheels covered with iron rims. The driver was accompanied by a javelin-bearing warrior, and scythes were sometimes attached to the axles as additional weaponry. When Queen Boudicca mounted her rebellion in 60 CE, she carried her two daughters aboard her chariot so that they could witness her mow down the Roman soldiers who had raped them.

The Celts often charged their chariots directly at the enemy during battle, to inspire fear and panic in the opposing troops. In the heat of combat, charioteers dismounted from their vehicles and fought melee-style with swords and javelins before riding to safety. So effective was this battlefield technology that the great Julius Caesar himself,



recounting the rout of his Seventh Legion in Britain, wrote of “the terror inspired by the horses and the noise of the wheels.”

THE MAN WHO WROTE THE HISTORY

A biographical sketch of Publius Cornelius Tacitus

Well connected, influential, and with an axe to grind, Publius Cornelius Tacitus had a lot in common with today’s political commentators. Born around 56 CE—during the reign of the emperor Nero—he enjoyed a successful political career that culminated in his appointment as governor of the Roman province of Asia.

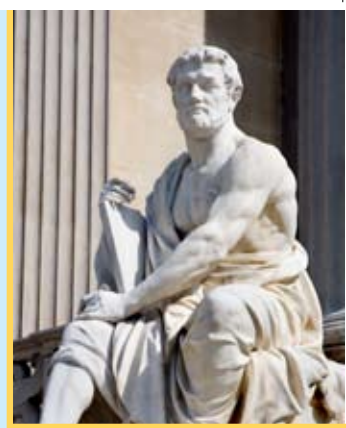
Despite his importance as a politician, Tacitus cemented his place in history with his writings. In compact, elegant Latin, Tacitus excoriated those he felt were responsible for Rome’s decline into decadence and corruption, while lauding the men whom he believed upheld traditional Roman values. His earliest historical work is a biography of one of the latter: his own father-in-law, Gnaeus Julius Agricola, a celebrated general credited with Rome’s later success in Britain.

Agricola, written in 98 CE after the reign of the despotic emperor Domitian, sharply contrasts the loyalty and honesty of the eponymous general with the vice of the emperor. The work is also significant for offering a brief study of native Britons at the time of the Roman invasion—an invaluable resource for modern historians.

Germania, composed in the same year as *Agricola*, is an ethnographic study of the Germanic tribes. Tacitus, in typically Roman fashion, highlights some of the more unsavory aspects of Germanic civilization—among them what he perceived to be the tribes’ savagery and laziness. As in *Agricola*, though, his tone towards the natives was not wholly negative.

He praised their simple virtue and bravery in battle, once again subtly criticizing the debauchery of his own countrymen.

Although it’s indisputable that Tacitus’s writings are far from objective, his graceful prose, attention to detail, and deep understanding of the machinations of political and military history mark Tacitus as one of Rome’s greatest historians.



Statue of Tacitus outside Vienna Parliament

HOW THE ANCIENT BRITONS LIVED

Everyday life among the original inhabitants of the Isles

It’s hard to imagine how alien Britain must have seemed to the Roman invaders. For one thing, their warriors were blue. Julius Caesar reported that the men shaved their body hair and painted their skin with woad, a flowering plant that yielded an indigo dye. In fact, the Romans called the land Britannia—a Latin corruption of the Celtic name Pretaniké, related to the term “painted” or “colored.”

Much of what we know about the pre-Roman Britons comes from accounts by foreigners, who called them barbarians and had self-serving reasons to sensationalize their savagery. According to modern historians, though, Britannia was populated by Celtic peoples who had gradually migrated from Gaul and mingled with the indigenous population centuries before the Romans arrived. The tribes along the southeast coast in particular shared a common culture and carried on a lively cross-channel trade with their Gallic kin.

Just how brutish were the ancient Brits? Although they surely deserved their reputation for ferocity in battle, they also developed a sophisticated culture. They grew wheat and barley in fields plowed by oxen, gathered honey, hunted wild game, and raised cattle and horses. Caesar had heard stories characterizing the interior tribes as more barbaric than their coastal neighbors; they didn't farm, but "lived on meat and milk" and wore animal skins. Nevertheless, even these people minted coins and created exquisite jewelry from the gold and silver that they mined. They threw fine ceramics on potter's wheels and decorated their work with elaborate, distinctively flowing art.

The Celts organized themselves into local clans, which in turn formed regional tribes led by a chieftain. Within each group, a social hierarchy reigned: non-landowning field hands, herdsmen, hunters, and laborers at the bottom; blacksmiths, artisans, and farmers in the middle; and warriors, priests, bards, and kings at the very top.

The Celtic elite included women, unlike many other cultures of the day. Boudicca, the tragic heroine of the revolt in 60 CE, wasn't the only woman afforded high status among her people. Well before the Roman invasion, the historian Diodorus Siculus remarked that Celtic women "are not only like men in their stature, but they are a match for them in courage as well." Domestically, however, women's roles remain unclear. According to Julius Caesar, the Britons shared their wives—sometimes among as many as a dozen men, including fathers and sons. Modern historians don't know how much credence to give his reports.

Certainly, religion infused the everyday lives of the ancient Britons. They worshipped a vast pantheon of gods and goddesses who shifted shapes and assumed different identities in a dizzyingly complex mythology. Druidic priests wielded great power in their communities; the Celts believed these holy men alone had access to the gods. And the entire community celebrated seasonal rites by woodland streams and in sacred groves. Excavations reveal that these rituals involved sacrificing humans as well as animals. Our Halloween has its deepest roots in the ancient Britons' ritual slaughter to propitiate the deities before winter.

Although British Celts left no literature, they did know about writing. By the time Caesar invaded Britain, the priestly class was literate. Scholars know that they also had a vibrant tradition of music, song, and oral poetry—now mostly lost.

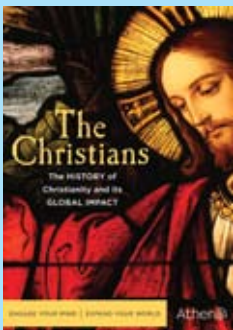
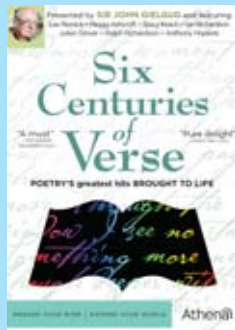
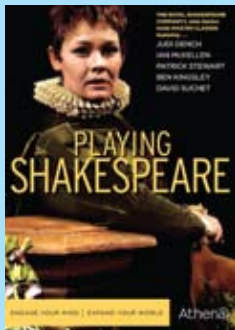
Finally, no one exaggerated the Celts' fury in battle. They fought frequently and brutally; because they believed the skull was the seat of the soul, Celtic warriors adorned their saddles with the severed heads of their enemies. Of course, this sort of trophy-taking helped the "barbarian" label stick to the ancient Brits. But the Roman invaders came from a culture that turned execution into a public spectacle and state-sponsored killings at the Coliseum into a sport. From today's perspective, it's hard to judge who was more civilized.

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The Celtic god Sucellus

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