

Just How Great Was Boudicca's Revolt?

This paper is a response to the interpretation of the magnitude of Boudicca's revolt as depicted by David Mattingly in his book *An Imperial Possession: Britain in the Roman Empire 54 BC to 400 AD*. Mattingly depicts the revolt as a disaster for both Roman Imperial aims in Britain and for the native inhabitants themselves. According to Mattingly, the revolt posed a severe threat to Rome's ability to subdue all of Britain, and almost permanently halted their aims. Not only did the Roman military's death toll reach the thousands, but also Rome's military honor suffered a tremendous blow, which threatened her confidence in subduing all of Britain. For the native inhabitants, the revolt was equal in its severity, though the consequences were different. Not only did they suffer the hardship of the Roman military response, which included the deaths and casualties of soldiers and civilians, but the inhabitants, relying on agriculture for substance, experienced severe economic hardship as trade routes were disrupted and markets rendered inaccessible, thereby severely harming the inhabitants ability maintain a necessary standard of living.

This paper, by relying on Tacitus' account of the revolt both in the *Annals* and in the *Agricola*, however, argues against Mattingly's maximalist depiction of the revolt's repercussions on both the Roman Imperial project and on the native inhabitants. To be sure, the revolt was an extremely serious affair—this paper does not dispute that; however, it does take issue with the ripples the revolt generated. Where Mattingly sees giant waves, that moved out broadly in concentric circles, rocking, and nearly knocking down Roman Imperial aims and the native inhabitants, this paper sees the effects more as ripples, that remained relatively close in radius to the epicenter of the revolt. In other words, the revolt's damage was localized and short lived. Tacitus' own description of the revolt supports this: a relatively small percentage for the Roman

forces took part in subduing the revolt and an even smaller number died; the revolt did not gain allies from other British tribes; and the revolt was decisively crushed in one major battle. This does not translate into a major frustration of the Empire's ultimate goal of subduing all of Britain; rather, it was a minor setback. Regarding the natives, the repercussions were similarly small scale. Those who suffered most acutely were the men who took part in the actual fighting. To be sure, as Mattingly claims, inhabitants who depended on markets and trade routes that were upset by the military action were affected adversely; but given the brief length of the revolt and how localized it was, and given that at this point in Britain, long distance trade was small scale, and there was not a need to travel long distance to markets, the damage to the local economy must have been minimal. In sum, the picture that arises is of a short albeit brutal revolt and counter-attack, whose damage was severe but limited to those taking place in or living close to the fighting. Thus, Roman Imperial aims were not shaken or threatened, nor were the lives of the majority of natives disrupted.

This paper also suggests that part of the reason for Mattingly's maximalist reading of the revolt is due to his reading of Tacitus, who describes the revolt in dramatic terms and refers to it as a *cladis*. However, Tacitus' account can be read to support the more minimalist version of the revolt this paper advocates, if we weigh the facts Tacitus gives us against the biases inherent in his narrative. Tacitus' source was Agricola, who was a mentee of Seutonius Paulinus, and also perhaps the memoirs of Seutonius. Given this, it is possible that the dramatic representation of the revolt and the subsequent battle to subdue it—in particular the emphasis of Seutonius' forces being outnumbered—is exaggerated in order to depict Seutonius as the heroic general who single-handedly saved the day for Rome. Mattingly takes Tacitus' depiction of a dramatic and severe battle for granted, while this paper argues there is good reason to believe the bias of

Tacitus' sources exaggerated the severity of the battle, which further supports a minimalist reading of the revolt.

Bibliography

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