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Chronological Errors in Dio's Account of the Claudian Invasion

By ANTHONY A. BARRETT*

THE Roman invasion of Britain in A.D. 43 was an event of great importance both for the future history of the island and for the emperor Claudius' attempt to establish for himself a reputation as a great military commander, and it is unfortunate that there is not more reliable information on the campaign. The chapters of Tacitus' *Annals* that covered the years A.D. 37–47 are missing, and the summary of events in Britain in the *Agricola* says very little about the invasion. Suetonius' review of the campaign (*Claud.* 17) is very brief and (to Claudius) extremely hostile. Accordingly, so far as literary evidence is concerned, we must rely almost entirely on the account provided by Dio (60. 19–24). His description of the campaign seems relatively straightforward, but there are places where modern historians have felt inclined to treat his judgement with caution. For example, his apparent acceptance at face value of the arrangement that Claudius would come to the aid of Plautius in the event of a *genuine* emergency seems naïve. However, the possible weaknesses of Dio's judgement on this and similar points are not too difficult to discern; it is in points of detail that his errors have, in fact, been most misleading, and it might be useful to draw attention to two chronological errors in his account of the invasion that have escaped comment.

The first is a relatively minor detail. Dio tells us that on his departure for Britain Claudius handed over control of affairs in Rome to L. Vitellius, who, with Claudius, had held the consulship for six months: τὰ μὲν οἶκοι τῷ Οὐιτελλίῳ τῷ Λουκίῳ τῷ συνάρχοντι . . . ἐνεχείρισε (καὶ γὰρ ἐξ ἴσου αὐτὸν ἑαυτῷ ἑξάμηνον ὅλον ὑπατεύσαι ἐποίησεν), αὐτὸς δὲ ἐξεστρατεύσατο (60. 21. 2). This must be mistaken. A fragmentary section of the *Fasti Feriarum Latinarum* shows that the suffect consuls for A.D. 43 were L. Pedanius Secundus and Sex. Palpellius Hister.¹ Now these men must have entered office before 7 March, since Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 10. 35, informs us that an owl entered the shrine of the Capitol during their consulship and that because of this a ritual purification of the city was performed, which took place on 7 March.² Peditanus and Palpellius must, then, have entered office by the end of February at the latest, and this assumption receives some corroboration from Suetonius, *Claud.* 14, who tells us that all of Claudius' consulships were *bimemstris* except the last (in A.D. 51), which was *semenstris*.³ Dio, then, is mistaken in attributing a six-month consulship to Claudius (and Vitellius) in the year of the invasion.

The second chronological anomaly in Dio's account is more complex and also more serious,

* I am very grateful to Professor S. S. Frere for useful criticism of an earlier draft of this paper.

¹ *CIL* 14.2241 (= *CIL* 6. 2015).

² *Capitolii cellam ipsam intravit Sexto Palpellio Histro L. Pedanio coss., propter quod nonis Martiis urbs lustrata est eo anno.*

³ Suetonius does not include the consulship held by Claudius before he became emperor (in A.D. 37). Dio can hardly have confused Claudius' consulship of A.D. 43 with his last (in A.D. 51), since Suetonius seems to have been in error in stating that the last was for only six months. A gladiatorial *tessera* has survived (Dessau² 5161g) with an inscription showing that in A.D. 51 Claudius was still consul on 27 September, with L. Calventius Vetus Carminius.

since it affects the overall structure of his narrative. It will perhaps be appropriate to summarize the information that is relevant to the problem:

(a) Dio states explicitly (60. 19. 1) that the invasion of Aulus Plautius was contemporaneous with events that occurred in A.D. 43, the year of Claudius' third consulship (60. 17. 1).

(b) Although he does not state it explicitly, Dio's narrative implies that Claudius, in response to the appeal from Plautius, travelled, if not in haste, at least without serious or lengthy interruption from Ostia to Marseilles by ship, from Marseilles to north Gaul by land, and thence across the Channel to Britain.

(c) Claudius spent six months away from Rome. We are given this information by Dio (60. 23. 1), ἡλθέ τε ἐς τὴν Ρώμην ὁ Κλαύδιος ἕξ μῆνας ἀποδημήσας, and by Suetonius, *Claud.* 17, *sexto quam profectus erat mense Romam rediit*.

(d) Dio (60. 23. 1) notes that despite Claudius' absence of six months from Rome he spent only 16 days in Britain, ἑκαταίδεκα μόνος ἐν τῇ Βρεττανίᾳ ἡμέρας ἐποίησε. Suetonius, *Claud.* 17, says that Claudius conquered part of the island *intra paucissimos dies*.

(e) We are told by Dio (60. 21. 5) that after the submission of the British chiefs Claudius handed affairs over to Plautius and hastened back to Rome, αὐτὸς δὲ ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην ἡπείχθη.

(f) Dio (60. 23. 1) states that Claudius returned to Rome during the consulship of C. Crispus and T. Statilius, that is, in A.D. 44.

Now there must clearly be something wrong with this sequence of events as described by Dio. Since we can virtually rule out a mid-winter military campaign in Britain and can certainly rule out two mid-winter crossings of the Channel, at a time when even the Mediterranean was a *mare clausum*,⁴ it would have been impossible for Claudius to arrive in Britain in A.D. 43, spend 16 days on the island and hasten back to Rome to arrive there in A.D. 44. Moreover, since Dio describes both an uninterrupted journey to Britain *and* a hasty return, it is impossible to reconcile the total time that would be necessary for travel, as well as the 16-day campaign, with a total absence from Rome of six months.

Is it possible, then, to salvage the actual course of events from Dio's confused scheme? Since the lengthy absence from Rome and the short stay in Britain are corroborated by Suetonius it is probably reasonable to accept them as valid. Given that, we must assume one of two possibilities. The first is that Dio has omitted a reference to a delay in Claudius' outward journey and that the emperor did not conduct his actual campaign in Britain until the Spring of A.D. 44. Although there can be little doubt that Claudius' plan called for the initial conquest of the tribes of southern Britain in one season, there is no ancient evidence to show that his personal visit to the island in fact took place in the same year as Plautius' invasion, in A.D. 43. Claudius' departure from Rome was delayed by a number of factors. There was the initial refusal of Plautius' troops to embark from Gaul (60. 19. 2) followed by the difficulties encountered in tracking down the Britons (60. 19. 5–20. 1). There is also a possibility that the *expeditionis Britannicae dies*, postponed, according to Suetonius, *Galba* 7, by the illness of Galba, might refer to Claudius' departure from Rome.⁵

This might simply mean that Claudius was obliged to conduct his campaign in Britain in A.D. 43 in a shorter season than had been anticipated. It might, however, be argued that he set

⁴ Vegetius, *De Re Mil.*, 4. 39, tells us that the best sailing season is between 27 May and 14 September, and that between 10 November to 10 March the seas are closed to shipping (*maria clauduntur*). There are several instances where this prohibition on winter travel was ignored, especially at times of military crisis (listed by E. de Saint-Denis, *Rev. Ét. Lat.* xxv (1947), 196–215, and J. Rougé, *Rev. Ét. Anc.* liv (1952), 316–39), but we can rule out the possibility that Claudius would have exposed himself to the unnecessary risk of crossing the Channel twice in winter.

⁵ D. Dudley-G. Webster, *The Roman Conquest of Britain* (London 1965), 75, suggest that the reference is to Claudius' *expeditio* from Gaul to Britain.

out from Rome too late to be able to cross over to Britain and return during the safe sailing period and spent the winter of A.D. 43/44 in north Gaul with his troops, making preparations for his own campaign. This scheme would involve us in some serious difficulties, however. It is hard to imagine how Claudius might have been gainfully employed during the four months or so that he would have had to while away in Gaul. Also, if the delays were serious enough to cause him to delay his own campaign for a whole season, it seems remarkable that no literary source saw fit to mention the fact. Perhaps the major difficulty is that such a reconstruction would mean an abandonment of Dio's usual annalistic method, since the account of the campaign in Britain precedes the introduction of the events of A.D. 44 (60. 19. 1).

Another possibility is that the fault is to be found in Dio's account of the return rather than the outward journey. On this assumption Claudius would depart from Rome and complete the campaign in A.D. 43, but spend several months on the return journey.⁶ Unfortunately there is no direct ancient evidence that might substantiate this suggestion; there is, however, a hint in Pliny the Elder that Claudius might have been involved in some sort of preliminary celebration of his triumph en route for Rome. In a somewhat cryptic passage Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* 3. 119) says that Claudius sailed in a massive ship from the mouth of the Po near Ravenna into the Adriatic, as part of the celebration of his British triumph: *Claudius Caesar e Britannia triumphans praegrandi illa domo verius quam nave intravit Hadriam*. Whether this involved a brief excursion into the sea or some sort of majestic expedition south then north along the Italian coast to Ostia is not made clear, and it must be conceded that it might well have taken place after the formal celebration in Rome. Even if such tenuous evidence is set aside, however, this second alternative still has the merit that it is consonant with Dio's annalistic method. It may, also, be possible to work out where Dio has gone wrong. S. S. Frere has suggested, in correspondence, that Dio's words, αὐτὸς δὲ ἐξ τὴν Ῥώμην ἡπείχθη, need not necessarily be taken to mean that Claudius hastened back to Rome, but rather that he was in a hurry to leave Britain. In support of this it might be noted that the reference to Claudius' return is contained in a μὲν . . . δὲ construction, where the action of Plautius, who stayed on the island to sort out remaining difficulties, is contrasted with that of the emperor, who hastened away. Also, Dio says that Claudius' sons-in-law were sent ahead to Rome with news of the victory (60. 21. 5), so that Claudius' haste can have been at best only relative. The problem is that the very same phrase, ἐξ τὴν Ῥώμην, is used a little later by Dio (60. 23. 1) to describe Claudius' actual *arrival* in Rome, ἤλθε τε ἐξ τὴν Ῥώμην, and it seems difficult to escape the conclusion that Dio must similarly have had the whole journey in mind in the earlier reference. This problem could, however, be eliminated if we were to carry Frere's suggestion back one stage further and assume that Dio's original source (possibly the lost portion of Tacitus' *Annals*) stated, perhaps ambiguously, that unlike Aulus Plautius, the triumphant emperor made all haste to leave the scene of his victory. Dio might have misunderstood the reference and have carelessly assumed that the haste referred to the whole journey back to Rome, without realizing that this would create a chronological absurdity in his own account.

In the case of the first error described we can conclude simply that Dio has blundered on a minor point. The second is more serious, since Dio's account, *taken at face value*, stretches out events that, as he describes them, could have lasted no more than two months to fill out a campaign which he himself describes as lasting for six months. Without further literary evidence it may be impossible to provide a chronological reconstruction that eliminates the difficulties, but for the present the reader of Dio's narrative should, as the very least, be placed on his guard.

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⁶ Modern authorities generally assume that the campaign was completed in A.D. 43. Frere, *Britannia* (London 1978²), 82, suggests that Claudius travelled slowly through Gaul during his return journey.