



The Varain Disaster and the Boudiccan Revolt: Fabled Victories?

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The Varian Disaster and the Boudiccan Revolt: Fabled Victories? Giles Standing writes: The purpose of this brief Note is to offer support to the thesis proposed by C.J. Simpson concerning the statue of Victory at Colchester.¹⁹ The Victory has previously been taken as evidence for the establishment of the provincial cult *Romae et Augusto* at Colchester by analogy with the architectonic arrangement of Lyon, in Gaul.²⁰ Simpson has illustrated, however, that reference to statues of Victory in Roman literature was made not on the basis of concrete historical fact but rather as a literary device (*topos*) to herald a forthcoming Roman defeat or triumph against a foreign foe.²¹ A further literary example, not cited by Simpson, strengthens this argument.

Tacitus, writing in the early second century A.D., is the sole source for the statue of Victory at Colchester. The statue is recorded in the *Annales* at the head of a series of prophetic omens made manifest prior to the sacking of the *colonia* by Boudicca's forces in A.D. 60/1 — the Victory falling from its pedestal, 'its back turned as if in retreat from the enemy'.²² The Boudiccan attack on Colchester is also recorded by Cassius Dio in the early third century A.D., though, in a similar but reduced list of portents, Dio makes no

¹⁹ Simpson 1996, 386–7.

²⁰ Simpson 1996, 386 note 282. See most recently Fishwick 1995, 23–5; 1997, 43–5.

²¹ Simpson 1996, 386. See also Dio 50.8.3 for a comparable Victory *topos* prior to battle between Caesar and Mark Antony.

²² Tacitus, *Annales* 14.32.1; Black 2001, 416; Simpson 1996, 386.

reference to the Victory or its supernatural movement and changed orientation.²³ It has been suggested, therefore, that the two historians either derived their accounts of the Boudiccan Revolt from a common Flavian source, which was adapted and embellished by Tacitus, or that different sources were used, Dio most probably basing his narrative on that of Cluvius Rufus, and Tacitus on Fabius Rusticus or Pliny the Elder.²⁴ It is interesting to note that Tacitus did not refer to the Victory in his earlier account of the Boudiccan Revolt in the *Agricola*, most likely derived from the account of Fabius Rusticus, though it takes a prominent role in the later *Annales* narrative, perhaps after the example of Pliny.²⁵

It is Cassius Dio, rather than Tacitus, who provides us with a comparable example for the portentous Colchester Victory. Prior to the Boudiccan Revolt, Rome experienced a similarly devastating provincial rout in the ambush of Quinctilius Varus' legions in the Teutoburg Forest in A.D. 9. In the same way that he recorded a series of inauspicious events (though not the Victory) prior to Boudicca's attack, Dio similarly introduced the Germanic uprising with a number of divine apparitions:

For a catastrophe so great and sudden as this, it seemed to him [Augustus], could have been due to nothing else than the wrath of some divinity; moreover, by reason of the portents which occurred both before the defeat and afterwards, he was strongly inclined to suspect some superhuman agency ... a statue of Victory that was in the province of Germany and faced the enemy's territory turned about to face Italy...²⁶

While Tacitus makes no mention of this Victory in the *Annales*, he does make a literary link between the uprisings of Boudicca and Arminius in the *Agricola*, placing the following words in the mouths of the Britons: 'What a mere handful our invaders are, if we reckon up our own numbers! Such thoughts prompted the Germans to throw off the yoke; and they have only a river, not the Ocean, to shield them'.²⁷ It may be suggested, then, that both Tacitus and Dio considered the two disasters to be literary equivalents, recording them in comparable rhetoric. This would appear to strengthen Simpson's assertion that the portents in the Boudiccan narrative were formulaically written, based upon prior literary tradition rather than fact.²⁸ Indeed, if Dio based his account of the Germanic portents on sources contemporary with the event, as may be expected, his reference to the Victory and its unpropitious movement might justifiably be considered to predate Tacitus' account of the Colchester Victory, being based on accounts some half century earlier. Thus, Tacitus — and no doubt his erudite readers also — would have had prior knowledge of this, a then already established, literary device.

It may serve well finally to consider the original author of this interesting *topos*. Tacitus names Pliny the Elder in the *Annales* as an important source for detailed information on the wars against the Germans during the early first century A.D.²⁹ Pliny himself acknowledges a debt to a similar work on the German wars (including the Varian Disaster) by the earlier historian, Aufidius Bassus, whose history Pliny also continued.³⁰ Reference to divine portents prior to battle (though not specifically Victories) occurs earlier still, however, in the works of Livy and Virgil, and, if based on original accounts, these may represent a considerably earlier date for the introduction and use of such *topoi*.³¹

Whilst the purpose of this Note has been to illustrate further the literary nature of the Colchester Victory rather than any architectonic significance which has been assigned to it in the present, the premise of this piece does not preclude the possibility that the *colonia* was initially established with an altar cult *Romae et Augusto* — for this seems to be a supportable assumption even without the presence

²³ Dio 62.1.1–2.

²⁴ Black 2001, 415–21, 426–7.

²⁵ Black 2001, 422–3; Tacitus, *Agricola* 16; Tacitus, *Annales* 14.32.1.

²⁶ Dio 56.24.2–5 (trans. Cary 1924, 53).

²⁷ Tacitus, *Agricola* 15 (trans. Handford 1970, 65–6); Handford 1970, 145. See also Mann 1985, 21–4 for two *topoi* in the *Agricola*.

²⁸ Simpson 1996, 386–7.

²⁹ Tacitus, *Annales* 1.69.2; Syme 1958, 276, 288–9; Goodyear 1981, 125–6; Handford 1970, 24–5.

³⁰ Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 3.5.4–6; Syme 1958, 274–6, 288–9; Black 2001, 417–18.

³¹ Ogilvie 1965, 586, citing the example of honey bees, on which see Dio 56.24.4; Wiseman 1995, 120. See also Simpson 1996, 386 for a Victory *topos* perhaps originally preserved from a third-century B.C. source.

of statues of Victory — but rather, as Simpson asserts,³² that the Tacitean account of the Victory cannot be used *in itself* as evidence for such a cult foundation at Colchester.

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A Fragment of a Military Diploma for Pannonia Found in Northern England?³³ Geoffrey D. Tully writes: A fragment of a hitherto unpublished Roman military diploma, now at the University of Queensland, is interesting for the additional light it sheds on links between Britain and Pannonia at the beginning of the second century A.D.³⁴ In general, military diplomas consisted originally of two hinged bronze tablets (each measuring 16 by 12 cm, or thereabouts, and 1–1.5 mm thick). Issued on the authority of the emperor to soldiers as a reward for time in service or valour in combat, they conferred on the recipient certain privileges, which for an auxiliary soldier included the grant of Roman citizenship for himself and his children, and, upon discharge, the right to marry a non-Roman woman.³⁵ The present diploma comes from the collection of Mr R. Tooby† of Bath, and is said to have been found 'in Northern England'.³⁶ This 'findspot' may be accepted for the present, but it may require modification later on (see below).³⁷

A close inspection of the fragment reveals that it is the central portion of the upper half of a first tablet, viewed from the outer face (FIG. 1). It has a dull green patina and there is some surface corrosion on the upper left portion and along the right side of the outer face. There is no evidence of binding holes.

³² Simpson 1996, 386–7.

³³ I wish to thank Professor Denis Saddington, Dr Mark Hassall, and the two anonymous referees for their helpful comments on a draft of this paper.

³⁴ The fragment is now on display in the University of Queensland's Antiquities Museum.

³⁵ Roxan 1981, 265–6. The qualifying periods of service were: sixteen years for praetorians; twenty for men of the Urban cohorts; twenty-five for auxiliaries and twenty-six for marines. Legionaries, as Roman citizens, did not normally receive diplomas, although some special issues were made to members of *I* and *II Adiutrix* in A.D. 68–70 to legalise the status of men who had been hastily converted from sailors to legionaries during the Civil War.

³⁶ The fragment was acquired by the University of Queensland in 2003 from Mr James Ede (of Charles Ede Limited, London) who provided the information on the diploma's previous owner and provenance. Mr R(ichard?) Tooby is said to have passed away in Bath between ten and twenty years ago (c. 1983–1993).

³⁷ There are now twenty-four diplomas, or parts of diplomas, associated with Roman Britain. Of these, at least four have a question mark over their origin. One diploma, *CIL* XVI.115 (= *RIB* 2401.13), is generally thought to belong to Britain because it was found in association with another (*RIB* 2401.10) certainly issued to the *auxilia* of Britain. Three other examples are listed as possibly of the *auxilia* of Britain: *RMD* I 45 (= *RIB* 2401.11), 83 (= *RIB* 2401.5), 146 (= *RIB* 2401.4). See now also the diploma fragment found at Great Dunham: Tomlin and Hassall 2003, 375f.