

## *Et Tu Caesar: Roman Invasion, Part One*

So. The Romans. Most people know the basics about the Romans. Julius, their top boy, had a go at us and went home tail between his legs, and then a while later his lads came back and had another go... and so Britain 'began'. Good. Great. Job done.

Except that it's not. Our Roman 'friends' did *not* create civilisation in Britain, they grafted their way of things onto what was already here, despite what you may have heard about the eagle-bannered legions. Moreover British resistance to foreign rule did *not* collapse after the invader's victory against Queen Boudicca, though, to mix my metaphors, the home team did have a very bad day at the office, or rather field. Ultimately, the full Roman conquest/colonisation of Britain was a gradual process that took decades to run its full course, and involved 'carrots' as well as 'sticks', and as such, this, the first chapter of 'History as I see it', will discuss the 'real' beginnings of civilisation in the British Isles. We will also touch on how Caesar's Rome came into being, and also why her leaders were so keen on bringing these two worlds together.

Let's face it: they *were* impressive, those lads from across the sea there, even if they were the 'baddies'. Founded before the birth of Christ, the Roman Empire existed in one form or another and in various places right up to the time of Napoleon's invasion of the Holy Roman Empire (modern Germany) in the early 1800s.<sup>1</sup> Yet this greatest of institutions almost never came into existence, at least not as we know it; and had it not been for one very ambitious man, a politician and general who played a pivotal role in the histories of both his country and ours, things might have turned out very, very differently.

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<sup>1</sup> Several centuries into its life the Empire effectively split in two. Whilst the Eastern half came to be ruled by the Greeks from modern-day Turkey, the Western Empire eventually withered until it was reconstituted by the Pope in the early middle ages, the first Holy Roman Emperor being Charles the Great, or 'Charlemagne'.

Julius Caesar (100–44 B.C.), is remembered as the greatest Roman of them all. Conqueror of much of Northern Europe, consul and general of Rome, he was the man for whom the word ‘Emperor’ was coined, though he never lived to occupy the throne he was responsible for creating. In 55 BC, around a decade before his untimely demise and just before the victory at Alesia that *really* made his name, Caesar led the first of two expeditionary forces to Britain, landing near Deal in Kent on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August. But what did he expect to find when he got here? Luckily the old chap was a bit of a keen writer, and thanks to this little hobby (and the work of Roman ‘historians’ like Tacitus) we have a pretty good idea of what was going on back then, despite the passage of time.

Two things are certain: firstly, the lights had been switched on, so to speak, long before JC’s little bunch decided to pay their island neighbours a ‘friendly’ visit. There is unambiguous evidence of indigenous British culture(s) evolving for thousands of years before Caesar’s arrival (just think of Stonehenge, or of the intact and equally ancient villages on the Orkney Islands), though admittedly these were dwarfed by the settlements in mainland Europe. What ‘we’ *did* have though, was towns, local economic activity, regular trade with the continent, a common language (Celtic), and even a ‘national’ religion led by the mysterious Druids. It was all on a small scale relatively speaking, but then again the British have always been good at punching above their weight.

The often overlooked level of development in Britain at the time leads us neatly to the second important point about the invasion: the defenders knew the Romans were coming. More specifically, they knew Caesar and his intentions, and as such, and very wisely in my opinion, the British decided to be sneaky. Rather than present themselves somewhere near the beachhead and do things ‘by the book’, i.e. form up into a big field-dwelling army and get chopped up by the better equipped enemy force, they instead melted away to conduct a Guerrilla campaign. Caesar’s army was one that many of his new opponents had previously

served in as auxiliaries, and, as such, they were more than aware of what a bunch of Gladius-wielding legionnaires could do when the mood took them. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the British stalled for time. Enter the tide, literally. It has often been said that the weather ‘bats for England’, both on the battlefield and Cricket pitch. In this case however, the sea did. The Romans, who were used to the nice sunny ‘millpond’ surrounding Italy, had not considered the fearsome tides of the English Channel, and like Napoleon centuries later, Caesar was a general, not an admiral. Disaster struck for the invaders when their cavalry attempted to land.

Whilst this serendipitous turn of events gave the British another year, it does pose a question: why *was* our old mate Julius going to all this trouble in the first place? After all, we know from his own writings that the following year he came back with a vastly increased force which was properly equipped with landing craft. From what we know, the answer is twofold: ambition and debt. JC’s need to succeed had thus far served him very well indeed, and like any successful gambler, people, let’s be nice and call them ‘investors’, had lent him money.

Ultimately, Caesar was no fool. The general knew that his credit would dry up as soon as he stopped winning, and, when it did, his chance of becoming the monarchical leader of the Roman people would go with it... and *that*, is why he came to Britain (for the second time), and, perhaps more importantly, left again without completing his conquest. The would-be emperor did not *need* to win outright in Britain; he just needed a victory, or at least something to spin one out of.<sup>2</sup>

In the end, then, whether Caesar had indeed got what he was after or not, that fact was that for the time being at least the Romans had gone home and Britain was safe. So what happened to him? It is indeed one of history’s greatest ironies that the ambition that propelled Julius to god-like status within his own lifetime was paradoxically the cause of his downfall.

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<sup>2</sup> Caesar had recently fought a civil war against one of the other Roman consuls, Pompey, and needed to shore up his image with his ‘investors’ and the wider populace as a result.

Seen to be going too far when he threatened the Republic with his dynastical ideas, the people's representatives murdered him in Rome's Senate Chamber, triggering one of the greatest civil wars in history.<sup>3</sup> Yet even death could not stop such a man, and he who would have been king *did* ultimately win the war for the soul of Rome. After the bodies had turned cold in the strife that followed his death, Caesar's adopted son-and-heir Octavian ascended the Imperial throne, and with that accession the days of the Roman Republic came to an end. The young protégé certainly seems to have had the ego of an emperor. You may not be aware that Augustus, as history has remembered him, named a month of the year (August) after himself as he didn't want to be outdone by July, which Julius had named after himself (drastically altering the Roman calendar in the process). Not to be out-done however, young Octavian made a point of altering the calendar so August would contain 31 days, equal with July; it has stayed that way ever since.

. So, around a century after the death of Julius Cesar it would be a Roman Emperor, not a consul, who would finally plan and instigate the successful invasion of the British Isles discussed in the next chapter. And, as we know, the Romans would enjoy centuries of success in monarchy mode. In the East, things would go particularly well... but that, as they say, is another story.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Events covered in detail by the great William Shakespeare in his play 'Julius Caesar'.

<sup>4</sup> Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor, moved the Imperial Court from Rome to Constantinople (named after him) several centuries after Augustus. It survived as the Imperial Seat for even longer, eventually being lost when the Muslim Turks conquered the city in 1453. Today it is Istanbul, Capital of Turkey.

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