

Mapping Imaginary Space: Roman Conquest in Northern Europe

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Having conquered most of the Mediterranean coast, Rome focused its attention on new frontiers. The tribes and peoples of Northern Europe had been a consistent thorn in Rome's side, and with the disastrous Cimbrian war still fresh in Roman collective memory, Julius Caesar was dispatched to conduct a campaign in Northern Gaul. Past this point, Rome had a consistent interest and investment in Northern Europe, especially the territories of Gallia, Britannia, and Germania. Rome's experiences in Northern Europe shaped Roman tactical doctrine, influencing how they would conduct wars going into the imperial period. This paper will examine the Roman conception of foreign landscapes and peoples, and the use of imaginary space as a tactical tool. However, this intellectual mastery of foreign space is only one facet of Roman imperialism, there is also the mastery of foreign people, with the process of Romanization being used to control conquered space. However, Rome's success in Northern Europe ceased in the German territories on the Eastern bank of the Rhine river. Drawing comparisons to Roman actions in Gaul and Britain, this paper will investigate the Roman understanding of foreign space, why mapping imaginary space in Germania proved a challenge, and why the process of Romanization often failed in regards to German tribes, leading to military disaster of the Battle of Teutoburg forest and a continuing struggle with Germanic tribes.

The infamous Battle of Teutoburg is considered one of the greatest military defeats in Roman history. Betrayed by a trusted local ally, Rome lost three legions, most of their local German forces, and the sacred eagles of the Legions. This defeat would permanently affect Roman military doctrine and their treatment of foreign people. Prior to the Teutoburg disaster, Tiberius had experienced a great deal of success in Germania Magna, and had an understanding of the environment and people. However, with Tiberius recalled to handle the Pannonian revolt, P.

Quinctilius Varus took his place. Related by marriage to Augustus, Varus was an administrator who had largely served in Africa and Syria, but had little experience in Northern Europe. As such, Varus relied heavily on his German allies, including the Cheruscian peoples . and their Prince Arminius, who had been raised as a captive in Rome and held the rank of Equestrian. Varus ignored warnings about an ambitious young man, and trusted his expertise when dealing in regional matters. The Cherusci were also heavily integrated into the German auxiliaries (Wolters 2018, 13-14). This trust was misplaced, and Varus was lured by false reports of rebellion sent by Arminius. Varus dispatched three legions, which needed to venture through a narrow pass flanked by swamps and thick forests. It was here that the legions would be ambushed while marching in column through the pass. Attacked from all sides, it seems they were unable to properly mount a defense, and all three legions were all but wiped out, with their sacred eagles lost to the enemy (Bernario 2003, 404-405). This disastrous outcome highlighted some of the issues with Roman foreign policy. While leaders like Julius Caesar, Agricola, and Tiberius were able to map the imaginary space of the areas they were conquering, they were the rare few. While foreign allies were often useful, they had to be carefully monitored. The failure of Roman commanders to understand these facets of foreign space lead to a number of disastrous defeats and provincial mishaps, with Teutoburg in particular being especially damaging to Roman interests. The Teutoburg disaster is one of Rome's greatest military failures, brought about by a fundamental weakness in Rome's view of foreign space and understanding of indigenous others.

The writings of Gaius Julius Caesar are some of the clearest descriptions of late Republican military tactics and thought. In the *Bellum Gallicum*, Caesar demonstrates the effective use of a

number of Rome's best military strategies: "Due to the terrain, which offered our men a great opportunity, the enemies' inexperience and exhaustion, and the bravery of our soldiers, combined with the training they had received in previous battles, the enemy was unable to withstand even our first assault..."(Caes. B.Gall. 3.19.3). Caesar's tactics rely on clever use of the landscape, using hills and rivers to draw his enemies into disadvantageous positions, and creating situations where his army's equipment and experience will be of best advantage. He makes full use of his engineering corps, creating fortified camps, bridges, and earthworks, and often forces his enemies to fight uphill. Caesar's conquest in Gaul is marked by his trademark *celeritas*, reacting swiftly to enemy attacks and often getting ahead of the enemy due to clever use of the landscape and his engineers, often by creating bridges and other such shortcuts. Overall, Caesar presents the idea of Gaul as an intellectually mastered space, that he demonstrates an understanding of how to use the Gallic environment to his best advantage. Despite these successes, the *Bellum Gallicum* also highlights a number of the faults of Roman tactics, the same faults that would remain problematic in future wars. Book 5 describes an incident wherein a Roman column led by was ambushed from a thickly forested ravine. With their chain of command shattered, the Romans were unable to properly react to the enemy assault, and scrambled to save themselves and their possessions. Upon recovering their morale, the Romans were forced into a drawn-out battle, where they lost most of their chain of command (Caes. B.Gall. 5.32-5.35). This highlights the Roman weakness to sudden ambushes in foreign terrain, especially under an inexperienced or overconfident commander.

The remote island of Britannia seems an unlikely target for Roman imperialism, however Rome maintained a consistent interest in the territory. Britannia first caught Roman interest during the

Gallic wars, with Julius Caesar recognizing that enemy Gauls had been provided auxiliaries from a tribe in Britain. Caesar began his invasion by sending his fleets to reconnoiter the island to begin building his knowledge of the island's terrain. While this was effective in giving Caesar a general idea of the island's geography, his initial landing in Britannia was difficult, and gives an idea of the reduced effectiveness of Rome's military when faced with the unknown and unfavourable conditions. Inexperience fighting chariots and continuing difficulty regarding guerilla warfare made Caesar's first sortie into Britain a difficult affair: "The fighting was fierce on both sides. Our soldiers continued to be confused a great deal, because they could not maintain rank, gain a firm footing, or closely follow their own standards..." (Caes. B.Gall. 4.25.1). In book 5 of the *Bellum Gallicum*, Caesar gives an ethnography of Britannia, suggesting intellectual mastery of the space, passed along in turn to his Roman readers. He describes the local tribes, and their belief that they were the original natives of the island. Caesar also describes their lifestyle, their use of currency, and some of their cultural quirks, such as not eating poultry. He also speaks of how the inland tribes have even stranger customs, "(they) live on milk and meat and clothe themselves with skins. All the britons tattoo themselves with woad, which produces a blue color...this makes them look all the more horrible in battle" (Caes. B.Gall. 5.14.2). Caesar discusses the general shape of the island and most of its outer geography and location in reference to Germania and Gaul. Caesar would go on to achieve military success in Britain, despite the relatively unknown terrain and the unconventional tactics of the locals.

Following Claudius' conquest of Britain, the region was generally stable for roughly 20 years. However, in 61 BCE a number of British tribes rebelled, lead by the disgruntled Iceni queen Boudica. The result was the destabilization of the province, with Rome forced to increase

their military presence on the island. One of the generals dispatched to stabilize the region was Gnaeus Julius Agricola. Upon arriving in Britain in 77 CE, Agricola assembled his legionaries and auxiliaries, which had been scattered across Britain after completing their campaigning, and moved to engage the Ordovices tribe. Tacitus reports on this engagement: “As the Ordovices did not venture to meet him in the plain, he marched his men into the hills, with himself in front of the line to lend his own courage to the rest by sharing their peril, and slaughtered almost the entire nation” . Following his victory, he immediately proceeded to attack the island of Mona (Anglesey), using the expertise of his auxiliaries who were familiar with the fords to quickly take the island (Tac. Ag. 18). Agricola displays an understanding of proper province management, properly organizing taxation and levies and checking abuses of power (Tac. Ag. 19). He also makes a point of personally scouting the environment, launching coordinated raids, and kept the pressure on hostile tribes, quickly forcing their surrenders and encouraging their urbanization and Romanization, viewing the Britanni as having natural ability in the liberal arts (Tac. Ag. 20-21). Overall, Tacitus’ Agricola paints a picture of a man with an understanding of how to navigate foreign space. One of the best examples of this is Agricola’s tactics at the Battle of Mons Graupius. In this battle against the Caledonians, Agricola notably deploys his auxiliaries to the front, placing his heavy infantry behind the more lightly-armed auxiliaries. While some may see it as a use of more expendable provincials, historian Catharine M. Gilliver suggests that this was Agricola’s response to the marshy terrain of the battlefield. Roman heavy infantry is typically best used on flat, level ground, where they can make use of both offensive and defensive formations. In marshland, heavy gear tends to make a legionnaire sink into the ground, making it difficult to fight. Roman commanders therefore tended to employ light infantry

(typically auxiliaries) as their main force when forced to fight in this kind of terrain (Gilliver 1996, 56-57). Throughout the *Agricola*, Agricola displays an understanding of foreign space, gaining an understanding of both the local terrain and the local peoples, and uses that to best advantage in his tactics.

The territory of Germania remained a thorn in Rome's side for most of the imperial period. Rome's struggle with Germania is a complex problem, largely stemming from the German terrain being inhospitable to Rome's traditional military tactics, and the inability of Roman commanders to map, either physically or mentally, the German geography. This is reflected in the *Bellicum Gallicum*, wherein upon crossing the Rhine river, Julius Caesar is disoriented by the space, unable to intellectually master the German wilderness or its unknown peoples.

Throughout his writings, Caesar largely describes the territories of Gaul and Britain as strategic spaces, but his description of Germania is presented as a seemingly infinite space, describing the geography as a vast, unknowable expanse of trees. Historian Christopher B. Krebs suggests that Caesar was one of the main sources of Roman knowledge in the north, presenting new territories, tribes, and peoples to the Roman view of the world (Krebs 113-114). To the Romans, what is known is most threatening. By establishing an imaginary geography of a space, they can justify conquest. As discussed before, Roman strategy relied heavily on understanding an environment, finding favourable locations of battle, and using engineering to create fortified camps and earthworks. However, in Germania, not even Caesar was able to fully understand the landscape. As pointed out by Christopher B. Krebs, Caesar does not give exact numbers and details of the landscape, unlike the details provided on Gaul and Britain. In comparison, Caesar defines the Rhine river as the hard border of Roman cultural conquest, and draws the reader's attention to

the vast, unknowable forests. This is also frustrated by the German's refusal to meet the Romans in battle, and they are not provided an ethnography on the same level of the Britons or Gauls, only being described as barbaric and living in a similar manner to Scythians (Krebs 119-122). Without concrete knowledge of German space, Caesar is unable to justify attacking the region, and therefore retreats back beyond the Rhine.

While gaining an understanding of imaginary space was paramount to Rome's military success, another important facet of empire is gaining an understanding of the people inhabiting foreign spaces. The *Bellum Gallicum* describes several instances of Caesar interacting with his Gallic allies: "He (Caesar) understood the unstable nature of the Gauls, and he sensed how much influence the enemy had gained among them with a single successful battle" (Caes. B.Gall. 4.13.3). This indicates that Caesar understood that even his Gallic allies were not to be fully relied upon, and that their loyalties could quickly shift. Even his most stalwart allies, the Aedui, proved inconsistent in their help, with rebel factions dissenting against Roman rule (Caes. B.Gall. 1.17). However, Caesar also understood how to gain the loyalty of the Gauls. The best example of this is the Aedui tribe, as after Caesar had handled their dissident elements, their leader Diviciacus remained a stalwart ally of the Romans, especially since Caesar had shown *Clementia* to his rebellious brother Dumnorix. Caesar's *Clementia* also extended to his enemies, especially those who surrendered without issue. An example of this is his treatment of the defeated Helvetii and Boii, only harming those that attempted to flee. The Helvetii were ordered to return to their homes, and the Boii were allowed to settle with the Aedui (Caes. B.Gall. 1.17). Caesar's reputation for clemency only extended so far, and his wholesale slaughter of Germans making inroads into Gaul shows his willingness to treat his enemies cruelly. While Caesar was

recognized for his willingness to negotiate, he was also willing to send a message to both the Gauls and the Germans, that he was in control of Gaul and that more foreign elements would not be tolerated (Caes. B.Gall. 4.14). Other Romans also recognized Caesar's fairness and strength in dealing with enemies, and even Quintus Tullius Cicero (the popular younger brother of Marcus Cicero), sent the leaders of the Nervii tribe to Caesar in hopes that he could better respond to the demands of the Nervii (Caes. B.Gall. 5.41.7). Overall, Caesar's treatment of foreigners reflects Rome's attitude regarding both their allies and enemies during the late republican era, moving into the early empire. This is also demonstrated in other parts of Northern Europe, especially in the treatment of indigenous Britons and Germans.

Following Claudius' conquest of Britain, urbanization was quick to follow. One of the most well-known sites is Londinium, thought to have been built as a Roman settlement. It was built as a site of trade and administration and seems to be intended as a new British-Roman site, built on unoccupied land and built piecemeal over time, but lacking Roman public building such as a full forum (Wallace 2015, 5-7). Two other notable sites of early Roman Britain are Colonia Claudia Victricensis (modern Colchester) and Verulamium (St. Alban's). Verulamium was a pre-established British settlement, already connected with the provincial roads, that was expanded by the Romans to include elements of a Roman colonia, but still lacked a forum and key public buildings. Colonia Claudia was a more conventional Roman colonia, featuring a forum and even a Temple to the Divine Claudius, but still lacked other features typical to Roman colonial towns, and Colonial Claudia seems to be primarily settled by Romans, with a limited number of friendly Britons also present (Wallace 2015, 7-8). This strange state of colonization in early Roman Britain seem to reflect Roman unwillingness to commit to full-scale colonization

efforts in the remote province. Much of those immigrating to the new province seem to be Romanized Northern Gauls, drawn to Britain due to cultural and linguistic similarities, in addition to an increase in economic integration with the Roman provinces of Gaul and Germania. This immigration also fueled the increase in urbanization (Moore 2015, 15). Due to the stimulation of trade and the increasing demand from elite Britons for luxury imported goods from Rome and the provinces, many Britons opted to move from their traditional villages to newly established urban centers. It seems that many of the local population embraced the newly introduced material culture and opportunities to enrich themselves under the Roman system (Wallace 2015, 9). Overall, the treatment of native Britons was generally fair, with Rome establishing new urban centers that encouraged trade. However, the lack of conventional civic buildings in *colonia* of the era suggests that Rome was unwilling to invest fully in their new province. Following the death of Claudius, his successor Nero proved far less competent in managing the affairs of Britain, leaving the administration of the province to various officials. An example of Roman mismanagement during this period is the treatment of the Iceni, a client kingdom of Rome had been consistently neutral or pro-Roman during the early occupancy of the territory, with their king Prasutagus bequeathing his kingdom to Nero when he died. Tacitus, ever quick to point out Roman misdeeds, describes the mistreatment of the Iceni at the hands of Roman centurions. Prasutagus' daughters were raped, his wife Boudica flogged, the wealth of the tribe taken, and the debts of the Iceni to Rome called in. Following this, the Iceni revolted, forming a tribal confederation that destroyed a number of Roman urban centers (Tac. Hist. 34.31). Although Boudica's rebellion was put down, the previous goodwill towards Rome held

by the native Britons was irrevocably damaged by the actions of only a few Romans and a neglectful administration.

Following his settlement of Rome's internal conflicts, Augustus Caesar would conduct several campaigns in Germania, securing the border of the Rhine and establishing the two provinces of Germania Superior and Inferior. As such, much of Augustus and his stepson Drusus' early military campaigns in the region were campaigns of exploration, in an attempt to further understand the geography of the region. It was during these early campaigns that Rome made allies of the Frisians and the Chauci, two North German tribes who would provide auxiliary troops to the Roman excursions (Wolters 2018, 6). Following the death of Drusus, his brother Tiberius took over operations in Germany, advancing Roman troops as far as the Elbe river, and circumnavigating Jutland. This act of circumnavigation was critical to gaining a better knowledge of the northern regions, and influenced Augustus' decision not to push operations beyond the Elbe. In addition to this, the instability of foreign allies had once again caused issues, with Maroboduus of the Suebi confederation having a tendency to back Rome's enemies (Wolters 2018, 8-9). Following these setbacks, Rome abandoned several defensive positions, falling back towards the Rhine around 11 BC, and Tiberius was recalled to Rome. The next decade would be relatively quiet, and a state of early colonization was established East of the Rhine.

Despite Germanic territories west of the Rhine becoming the Provinces of Germania Inferior and Germania Superior, Germania Magna would remain a relatively unknown area throughout the Roman Imperial period. Despite constant campaigning in the region, the heavy

forest would still prove problematic for the Roman military. In Germania, Tacitus loosely describes the landscape and environment of Germania Magna: “Although the look of the place does vary a little, on the whole it is either spiked with forests or polluted by bogs. The region facing Gallia is soggy, that facing Noricum and Pannonia windier. It is sufficiently fertile, but unable to support fruit-bearing trees. It is rich in flocks and herds, but these are largely undersized. Even the cattle lack their natural beauty and noble aspect...” (Tac. Ger. 5. 1-5). Tacitus does not provide a particularly flattering description of Germania, describing it as a place antithetical to the Roman lifestyle as boggy, cold, and without the ability to grow fruit, and therefore without wine.

Germania paints an overall bleak picture of German space, impenetrable and vast, highlighting the limits of Roman knowledge. Tacitus defines Germany’s *silvae horridae* as unexplored and unnamed spaces, neglecting to mention Teutoburg, highlighting Rome’s lasting fear of German forests following the Teutoburg incident (Tan 2014, 191). However, not all of Tacitus’ descriptions of Germanic life are negative. Tacitus also describes the Romanization of the German provinces, speaking positively of Rome’s German allies. Romanization seems to have gone well in Rome’s German provinces and among their allies on the northeastern bank of the Rhine, with the Chatti, Cherusci, and Frisians considered trustworthy allies at varying points. In addition to the Cherusci, other German tribes would adapt to Roman lifestyles. Of particular note are the Ubii, who according to Tacitus: “... they have earned the rank of a Roman colony and like to call themselves Agrippinenses after their foundress Agrippina, are not ashamed of their ancestry ...as they had given proof of their loyalty to Rome they were stationed close to the west bank, to keep out intruders, not to be kept under surveillance themselves”(Tac. Ger. 28)”. By all

accounts, the colony of Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium was a typical Roman colonia, complete with defensive works, a forum, buildings for the imperial cult, and the all-important Capitolium, the civic center of a Roman colony (Hanel 2015, 3-4). This is notably different from the later treatment of British towns, suggesting a higher level of Romanization and trust prior to Teutoburg.

To summarize, the Battle of Teutoburg forest marks a turning point in Roman perception of foreign space and indigenous others. The battle itself was a perfect storm that highlighted critical flaws in Rome's understandings of German space, and to a lesser extent, foreign space in general. Julius Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum* highlights Caesar's clever use of landscapes, but also a legion's notable weakness to fighting against ambushes and in marshy terrain. It also highlights how foreign allies could not be fully relied upon, which also proved true with Arminius and the Cherusci tribe. Following Teutoburg, Rome's treatment of their Northern provinces seems to shift, with Neronian mismanagement leading to revolts and destabilization in Britain. However, Agricola also highlights a better understanding of foreign space and people following Teutoburg. Overall, Roman treatment of and success in foreign space depends on the Roman cultural perceptions of the time, but also the ability of individuals to gain their own imaginary geography of a space.

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