

The *testudo* and the Battle of Caer Caradoc, AD 50

This case study will consider the Battle of Caer Caradoc as a historical event and an illustration of Rome's battle strategies. The sources for the event reveal a number of difficulties in reconstructing Rome's battles, especially when historical accounts are decidedly one-sided.

The Battle of Caer Caradoc: sources

Caratacus and his brother Togodumnus were ambitious tribal generals for the Catuvellaunian tribes of Wales. They led an offensive as well as guerrilla attacks against the Roman forces from the start of the Roman invasion under Claudius (AD 43), and in AD 50 Caratacus prepared to make his last stand against the Roman forces. The main source for this battle is Tacitus' *Annales* (12.33–38), whose father-in-law Agricola served extensively in Roman Britain (Slide 2). In his account of the Roman victory, it is worth noting what is omitted (Slide 3): for instance, we have no estimates of how many men Caratacus commanded or how many he lost. It is assumed that he fought with the Ordovices, who inhabited the neighbouring territories, but the Romans' knowledge of Britain's tribes was not extensive, nor, on many occasions, even considered relevant by Roman historians. We also do not know the exact site of the battle (Slide 4). While Caer Caradoc means the 'fort of Caratacus' in Welsh, and there are some remains of a fort, this site (and especially the location of the river Severn) does not tally precisely with Tacitus' description. While the eastern parts of the Roman empire had a tradition of written history long before Rome, the western provinces did not have any such tradition. As a result, scholars have to rely on Roman historical sources, which do not always correspond with archaeological finds or geographical features.

Tacitus' account is generally quite fair: for instance, he notes the good position taken by Caratacus on a hillside by a river – either the Severn or the Teme. Whichever it was, the Romans were obviously the invading party and would have to ford the river to reach Caratacus' troops. Caratacus also built a stone rampart on the hill and manned it with soldiers:

'Inferior in military strength, Caratacus used the hidden contours of the countryside to his advantage for his strategy, immediately shifting the war into Ordovices lands, where he was joined by all who refused Roman peace. He chose a position for the battle in which both advance and retreat would be challenging for the Roman soldiers and comparatively easy for his men, piling up rocks on the more gentle slopes of the hill to serve as a rampart. In front of this rampart was a river of varying depths.'

(Tacitus, *Annals* 12.33)

In addition, Caratacus told his men that this battle would determine their freedom or their bondage.

This sort of fortification would likely have been sufficient defence against a tribal adversary. However, the Roman army was a much more formidable opponent, and the story of their victory is one of ingenious strategy, courage and technological superiority.

The Roman victory and the tortoise

The victory was achieved in a number of stages, the first of which involved crossing the river. The enthusiasm of Caratacus' forces, Tacitus records, was daunting for the Roman general P. Ostorius Scapula, but he persevered. First, he surveyed the river and found an appropriate place to cross, using a careful survey of the terrain to ensure his troops' safe passage.

When the legionaries reached the ramparts, they were barraged with stones and missiles, at which point they assumed the *testudo* ('tortoise') formation, and began removing the 'rude stone ramparts' (*Annales* 12.35). This formation (Slide 5) offered protection from fighting soldiers and missiles at the front and the back. Plutarch (*Antony* 45) describes a formation with a front row of kneeling soldiers whose shields faced forward, protected by at least three more rows of soldiers with shields locked above their heads like a roof (Slide 6). Arrows and missiles simply bounced off. On steep terrain, the front row of shields was less exposed, so soldiers beneath the protective roof could dismantle Caratacus' ramparts. The weakness of the *testudo* lay at the sides, but Caratacus' men were not about to relinquish their hilltop position, so they merely watched as the Roman army continued to deflect their missiles and destroy their ramparts.

The final stage was hand-to-hand combat, and Caratacus' lightly armoured men waited too long to retreat and regroup. They were caught fighting uphill, between the Romans' heavily armoured troops and their lightly armed auxiliaries. Tacitus (*Annales* 12.35) suggests that the Roman victory was due to a combination of the enemy's lack of armour and the superiority of the Roman fighting forces:

'The ranks of the fighting Britons were shattered, bereft of defensive armour such as breast-plates or helmets. When they faced the auxiliaries, they were taken down by the legionaries' swords and javelins; if they turned round, they encountered the auxiliaries' sabres and spears.'

Caratacus' wife and daughters were captured and the chief himself was handed over to the Roman forces by Cartismandua, a British queen. (Perhaps at this point the Romans should have noted that a British queen was a force to be reckoned with.) Caratacus was taken to Rome in chains, where, after years of resistance, he was a well-known adversary. He refused to beg for his life, offering instead a very eloquent speech. The emperor Claudius was clearly moved, as he granted Caratacus' request and freed both the chief and his family (*Tacitus, Annales* 12.36).

Conclusions

In Tacitus' account, the Battle of Caer Caradoc reveals all that is praiseworthy about Roman warfare: its superior armament, organization and cool-headed strategies as well as its respect for and clemency towards a great opponent. Rome's open-minded policies would make friends of a number of enemies, and some have even suggested that Caratacus' brother Togodumnus went on to become Togidubnus (or Cogidubnus) – mentioned by Tacitus as a king and ally of Rome and associated with the palace at Fishbourne. Of course, this policy did not always work: for instance, it failed spectacularly with the German general Arminius. But that is another story ...

Web resources

Good pictures of the site, a plan of the battle and models of the Roman camp and the *testudo* formation can be found at:

http://www.battlefieldanomalies.com/caradoc/09_photographs.htm

Bibliography

Tacitus' account is essential reading when studying this battle:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0078%3Abook%3D12%3Achapter%3D33>

Also useful are:

B. Campbell, *The Roman Army, 31 BC–AD 337: A Sourcebook*, Routledge, 1994.

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S. James, *Rome and the Sword: How Roman Warriors and Weapons Shaped Roman History*, Thames and Hudson, 2011.

N. Pollard and J. Berry, *The Complete Roman Legion*, Thames and Hudson, 2012.

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