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A Passage in British History

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A PASSAGE IN BRITISH HISTORY.

IN the middle of the third book of his *Histories*, Tacitus records some movements in the western provinces occasioned by the events of 69. The troops in Britain, he says, were partial to Vespasian, who had served there with distinction in the reign of Claudius, and a party was formed in his interest.¹

‘At this dissension, and amid the frequent rumours of civil war, the Britons plucked up courage, under the lead of Venutius, whose native pride, and hatred of the name of Rome, were further inflamed by a personal quarrel with Queen Cartimandua the ruler of the Brigants. Powerful by right of birth, Cartimandua had strengthened her dominion since she had taken Caratacus prisoner by guile and added splendour to the triumph of the Emperor Claudius. Hence came wealth, and the self-indulgence of prosperity ; and disdaining Venutius, her husband, she took his squire Vellocatus to share her bed and her throne. This sin divided her house against itself. On the husband’s side were the sympathies of the nation, on the paramour’s the passion and cruelty of its queen. Accordingly Venutius summoned help, and, aided by a rebellion among the Brigants themselves, he brought Cartimandua into the extremity of peril. Then the Romans were asked to send supports. Some companies and squadrons of our auxiliaries² fought with varying result, yet rescued the queen from danger. The kingdom was left to Venutius, the war to us.’

From this passage, taken alone, it is clear that Tacitus regards the successful enterprise of Venutius as inspired by the confusion of the year 69, though in order to explain the state of affairs among the Brigants he has to begin with the seizure of Caratacus in the early fifties.

In his latest work, describing an earlier period, Tacitus relates a part of the Roman operations in Britain which began under Claudius, who reigned from 41 to 54. The following episode occurs³ :—

‘Since the capture of Caratacus, Venutius, who belonged, as I said above,⁴ to the nation of the Brigants, was foremost in the art of war: long loyal, and protected by Roman arms while he had Queen Cartimandua to wife ; but subsequently a quarrel, and immediately afterwards a war, broke out between them, and he assumed hostilities against us also. But at first the struggle was merely

¹ *H.* iii. 44, 45.

³ *Ann.* xii. 40.

² *cohortes alaeque nostrae.*

⁴ Presumably in the lost part of book xi.

between themselves, and by the arts of cunning Cartimandua captured his brother and his kin. Enraged at this, and stung by the ignominy of submitting to the rule of a woman, the enemy broke into her kingdom,¹ a strong and picked band of warriors. This we had foreseen, and cohorts were sent to her aid, which brought on a sharp engagement, whose doubtful beginning was followed by a more satisfactory end. With a like result a battle was fought by a legion under the command of Caesius Nasica ; for Didius, burdened with years and abundance of honours, was content to act through his subordinates and to hold the enemy back.'

Here is a war not unlike the other, but placed by Tacitus in the last years of Claudius or the first of Nero, while Didius was governor of Britain, probably between 52 and 58.

Are the wars two, or one and the same ?

If they are the same, then in the *Histories* Tacitus records as due to the confusion of 69 a war which broke out in 54 ; he is at least eleven years beside the point ; and when he came to write the twelfth book of his *Annals*, he must either have forgotten this passage of his earlier work, or have wished by connecting his story and dating it aright to cover up a gross blunder, without a word of comment or excuse.

The assumption of the identity of the wars, and the charge of carelessness or dishonesty or both which it involves, have often been made or implied,² and from the nature of the case they may often be made or implied hereafter unless readers of Tacitus are put on their guard.

The chief differences between the two stories are these :—

(1) In the *Histories* the Romans send auxiliary foot and horse (*cohortes alaëque nostrae*) : in the *Annals* cohorts are sent, but also a legion.

(2) In the *Histories* various battles or battles of various issue (*uariis proeliis*) are fought : in the *Annals* the cohorts fight a single battle, which began doubtfully but ended pretty well, and the legion fights with a like result.

(3) In the *Histories* Venutius is left in possession : from the *Annals* we may fairly infer that the Romans, after two or more successful battles, and having a legion on the spot, secured their object and left Cartimandua seated on her throne.

(4) The war related in the *Histories* is assigned to 69, that in the *Annals* to the fifties.

These differences seem to me to form a substantial quorum, and I therefore suppose that Venutius made two attempts to seize the Brigantine throne. In the

¹ regnum.

² I have not examined the older histories and commentaries, but up to 1875, according to T. Wright, *The Celt, the Roman, and the Saxon*, ed. 3, p. 57, it had been 'usual to regard the two notices as relating to one event.' In recent times the identity of the two events is implied by Furneaux and Nipperdey-

Andresen in their notes on *Ann.* xii. 40. To the best of my knowledge, the only writers who clearly distinguish the two stories are T. Wright (*loc. cit.*), Sir James H. Ramsay, *The Foundations of England*, vol. i. p. 61, and Stein in Pauly-Wissowa's *Realencyclopädie*, s.v. Cartimandua.

fifties he failed ; but amid the troubles of 69 he tried again, and the Romans did no more than bring off the queen, leaving him in power and defiant of Rome.

This fits in very well with the progress of the Roman arms in our island. While the Brigants were under a client queen, the northern advance of the Romans was barred ; hence in 61 the ambition of Suetonius Paulinus turns not to the north but to the west. It is the change from a dependent queen to a defiant king which explains why the first governor appointed by Vespasian assailed the Brigants in 71. The tribe then passed from the suzerainty to the dominion of Rome, and the way into Scotland was thus opened for Agricola.

In neither passage has Tacitus given us a clear narrative, and in the *Histories* his sketch of the antecedents of the second attempt of Venutius is incomplete without a reference to the first. But such faults abound in his account of the British wars, and they are far easier to understand and excuse than the blunder of a dozen years or so with which he has been charged.

I may add that in the passage of the *Annals* Nipperdey's conjecture *regiam* for *regnum* is doubly bad : it presupposes, first, that the two stories are one and the same ; and, secondly, that in the *Histories* Venutius begins his attack on Cartimandua from inside the tribe. The latter cannot be inferred from the words of Tacitus.

If my account of these events is right, it is incredible that Cartimandua and the Brigants¹ should have taken a leading part in the great rebellion of 61, as a passage of the *Agricola* implies. The word *Brigantes*, justly suspected on other grounds, must be due to a slip of the memory or of the pen.

E. HARRISON.

Agr. 31 : Brigantes femina duce.