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GAIUS ON THE CHANNEL COAST

When historians study Gaius' activities on the Channel coast in A.D. 40, they may be forgiven for despairing or, more likely, for scoffing at the absurdity of it all before turning to other, more profitable areas of enquiry. Those who forge ahead regardless may well have a similar reaction when reading modern works that treat the episode. The methodologies employed have been, at times, as varied and as dubious as the conclusions they reach. For example, where scholars have found the sources unsatisfactory in providing meaning for Gaius' actions, one solution has been to invent a scenario that purports to make sense of the episode. Balsdon's interpretation is symptomatic here. He argues that Gaius intended to invade Britain but was prevented from doing so because the troops supposedly mutinied at the last moment.[1] There are many details in the episode, not to mention the general atmosphere and Gaius' elation,[2] which this argument does not explain satisfactorily, but most damaging is the sources' silence on the crux that Balsdon invents: why is the mutiny not mentioned, while many other details are narrated in the very context in which it supposedly occurred? The humiliation for Gaius would have been great and would have substantially aided the sources' presentation of a failed northern expedition. Balsdon's method of taking the only thing not mentioned by the sources and then using it as the key to understanding the episode as a whole is inherently flawed and should be a warning to scholars. Some have not heeded it,[3] and theories have been erected on its foundations, often leading to a significant misreading of the episode.[4]

An alternative to Balsdon's method is to concentrate on one detail in the sources and then to use that to provide the meaning of the whole incident. Woods's argument is a good example of this technique—and of how misleading it can be.[5] Woods argues that Gaius had not intended to invade Britain in early 40, that the sea-shells the emperor ordered his soldiers to collect were actually British ships which had been captured off the coast, and that Gaius had intended to take them back to Rome to celebrate a triumph for clearing the Channel of British shipping—a necessary prelude to an invasion. Woods's argument is not even remotely convincing. His method is to examine and to interpret the incident involving Gaius' command to his soldiers to pick up sea-shells, and to extrapolate from that the meaning of the broader context, in this case the reasons for the emperor's presence at the Channel and for his actions while there. It is a dangerous approach for it unduly inflates the role and the wider significance of the sea-shells, just as it ignores or inadequately analyses many of the

[1] J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *The Emperor Gaius (Caligula)* (Oxford, 1934), 88–95, at 91. Balsdon's is by no means the first or the worst, but it has been recently endorsed (see n. 3) and so demands refutation here.

[2] Dio 59.25.3, 4; cf. Suet. *Cal*. 46 (Gaius to his troops); see below.

[3] The most recent scholar to accept Balsdon's argument is D. Wardle, *Suetonius' Life of Caligula*: *A Commentary*, Collection Latomus 225 (Brussels, 1994), 301, 313.

[4] For example, M. B. Flory, 'Pearls for Venus', *Historia* 37 (1988), 498–504, at 500–2. In following Balsdon, she argues that Gaius had 'apparently' intended to emulate Julius Caesar's crossing to Britain. When his troops balked at a crossing, he made them collect shells, which were meant to be a contrast to Caesar's pearls, and thus to make the parallel obvious and humiliating for the recalcitrant soldiers. Flory's argument is essentially invalidated by a refutation of Balsdon's thesis.

[5] D. Woods, 'Caligula's sea-shells', *G&R* 47 (2000), 80–7.

historical details and historiographical issues involved.[6] This modern preoccupation with the sea-shells is largely a result, and a continuation, of the focus provided by the ancient sources, and for them the incident was yet another means by which to demonstrate the instability or the eccentricity of Gaius' character.

What is needed is an argument that best utilizes the extant source material and satisfies in explaining the whole as it does the parts. Suetonius' narrative remains the key for the background. He records that when Gaius reached Germany he set about inspecting his troops and making reforms in camp. In this context it is stated that the emperor received the surrender of Adminius (*Cal*. 44.2), probably in the autumn of 39.[7] Now, attempts have been made recently to discredit Suetonius' location of the defection in Germany, by privileging the arrangement furnished by a late source, Orosius.[8] Orosius briefly describes Gaius' scouring of Germany and Gaul, and his trip to the Channel coast. It is revealed that the emperor received the surrender of a son of Cunobelinus (i.e. Adminius) on the edge of the Ocean, and that Gaius then returned to Rome in the absence of any worthwhile opportunity for war:

> hic siquidem magno et incredibili apparatu profectus quaerere hostem viribus otiosis, Germaniam Galliamque percurrens, in ora Oceani circa prospectum Britanniae restituit. cumque ibi Minocynobelinum Britannorum regis filium, qui a patre pulsus cum paucis oberrabat, in deditionem recepisset, deficiente belli materia Romam rediit. (7.5.5)

The perception of Orosius' value seems partially to rest upon the belief that here he might have followed Tacitus' 'much missed chronological account', as he was supposedly doing elsewhere in this section of his narrative.[9] But Orosius' account does not necessarily betray any chronological fidelity, and convincing evidence is otherwise lacking for his consultation of Tacitus at this point. Rather, Orosius reads much more like Suetonius who is extensively used for the Julio-Claudian narrative.[10]

[6] Woods is forced to go to extreme lengths with his interpretation. He takes *conchae* (Suet. *Cal*. 46) to mean 'small [British] boats', which Gaius idiosyncratically termed 'sea-shells'. However, he is quite reticent about the nature of these hypothetical boats (were they merchant or military?), and suggests that the sources misunderstood Gaius' novel linguistic coinage. This is all very improbable. The idea that a British fleet had braved the treacherous seas of late autumn without any clear reason (since, on Woods' thesis, Gaius had no plans to invade) is unsustainable, as is the suggestion that the sources were misled by the emperor's linguistic inventiveness. If Gaius had termed the boats 'sea-shells', it is just this sort of humorous coinage that the tradition would have relished. As Woods observes, Suet. *Cal*. 47 explicitly notes an unusual usage by Gaius (ἀξιοθριάμβευτος), and it is simply unconvincing that a coinage like that hypothesized could have been so widely misunderstood.

[7] Balsdon (n. 1), 62, 88; H. Lindsay, *Suetonius: Caligula* (London, 1993), 145. Wardle ([n. 3], 309) argues that Suetonius arranges his narrative chronologically in these chapters. Thus, the surrender of Adminius occurred in autumn of 39, and the events of *Cal*. 45 and 46 belong to the period following, as indicated by the use of *mox* (45.1), *postremo* (46), and *hinc* (47).

[8] A. A. Barrett, *Caligula: The Corruption of Power* (New Haven and London, 1989), 137; D. Hurley, *An Historical and Historiographical Commentary on Suetonius' Life of C. Caligula* (Atlanta, 1993), 163, n. 90, 166–7.

[9] The quotation is from Hurley (n. 8), 163, n. 90.

[10] Often the similarities between Orosius and Suetonius are very close. For Gaius' reign, aside from the present narrative, cf. Orosius 7.5.2 (Suet. *Cal*. 30, 31), 7.5.10 (*Cal*. 49). For an event in another reign, cf. the narrative of Scribonianus' revolt of 42 at 7.6.6–7 with Suetonius' account at *Claud*. 13. In comparison to Suetonius, the extant books of Tacitus' *Annals* do not appear to have been consulted; cf. Orosius 7.4.18 with Tac. *Ann*. 2.47.1, but probably taken from Suet. *Tib*. 48.2. In comparison, the *Histories* were used extensively, and even for Julio-Claudian details: cf. Orosius 7.3.7 for Augustus closing the doors of the temple of Janus, which was drawn from the account in the now lost book(s) of Vespasian's reign. See also the appendix to Heubner's edition of the *Histories* (Stuttgart, 1978).

In his account of the German campaigns, Suetonius refers to the lack of an opportunity for war, *deficiente belli materia* (*Cal*. 45.1), and similarly Orosius states that Gaius returned to Rome because of the same problem: *deficiente belli materia Romam rediit* (7.5.5). Again, Suetonius mentions the surrender of Adminius:

> nihil autem amplius quam Adminio Cynobellini Britannorum regis filio, qui pulsus a patre cum exigua manu transfugerat, in deditionem recepto . . . (*Cal*. 44.2)

Likewise, Orosius states:

> cumque ibi Minocynobelinum Britannorum regis filium, qui a patre pulsus cum paucis oberrabat, in deditionem recepisset . . . (7.5.5)

The similarity between the two narratives, even down to the repetition of grammatical constructions (ablative absolutes, relative clauses, and participles), is striking. One can even perceive where Orosius seems to have misread Suetonius' narrative, writing *Minocynobelinum* for *Adminio Cynobellini*.[11] The significant difference between the two accounts—the location of Adminius' surrender—may suggest that Orosius consulted another source, but given the similarities with Suetonius, it is most plausible that Orosius himself made the connection. Only in this way can it be understood how two pieces of evidence from different chapters in Suetonius (*Cal*. 45.1 and 44.2, quoted above) can correspond with material from the same sentence in Orosius (7.5.5, quoted above). Such surface differences should not distract one from the underlying similarity. Thus, whilst it has been argued that Orosius is representative of a tradition which connects the surrender of Adminius with Gaius' foray on the coast,[12] I should suggest that the link is of a different nature: between Orosius and Suetonius, the former having constructed an account from his reading of the latter. Orosius now loses his significance for this episode and simply becomes a late manifestation of a tradition that is already extant in Suetonius.

Adminius was, therefore, received by Gaius in Germany. Suetonius describes it as the emperor's only notable achievement and Gaius' reaction makes it clear that he saw its potential and intended to derive from it as much glory as possible. *Magnificae litterae* were dispatched to Rome (*Cal*. 44.2); they have been identified as *litterae laureatae* which were used by triumphant generals to announce their victories to Rome (cf. Pliny, *N.H.* 15.133).[13] Gaius' *speculatores* were to race through the Forum, ignoring the ban on the use of vehicles during the daytime, and to deliver the *litterae* to the consuls and a full meeting of the senate at the temple of Mars Ultor (*Cal*. 44.2). The gesture is a pregnant one and demonstrates that Gaius wanted a triumph: the dispatches would have tended towards this end;[14] the destination made it obvious: the temple of Mars Ultor was where victory offerings were received and triumphs voted (Suet. *Aug*. 29.2; cf. *Cal*. 24.2; Dio 55.10.3).

This was a very public gesture by Gaius, and not the last. At *Cal*. 45.3, Suetonius states that he upbraided the senate and the people for their easy living whilst he was involved in fighting and facing great dangers. The emperor was keen publicly to advertise his active military experience and the associated glory, and in this context the

[11] Admittedly, this might have been a scribal error, but the MS tradition is uniform in representing the error or attempts to correct it. Hurley ([n. 8], 163, n. 90) is even here willing to record a tentative suggestion that it is a corruption of Tacitus.

[12] Barrett (n. 8), 137. [13] Hurley (n. 8), 162.

[14] During his return from Britain in 43, Claudius sent a dispatch, via his sons-in-law, prompting the senate to vote him a triumph and the cognomen Britannicus (Dio 60.21.5–22.1). See J. B. Campbell, *The Emperor and the Roman Army 31 B.C.–A.D. 235* (Oxford, 1984), 131, 148–9.

subsequent events on the Channel coast assume some meaning. Gaius' trip to and actions on the coast underline the seriousness with which Adminius' surrender was treated; it allowed Gaius a further means of extracting glory from the defection; and it served to prefigure the triumph at Rome. Preparations could be symbolic as much as practical and material—and, indeed, there was much symbolism to be exploited. Relocating to the Channel coast brought to mind thoughts of Britain, of the Ocean, and of the extension of *imperium*,[15] associations which could not necessarily be emphasized in the context of a German legionary camp. Gaius could be perceived as a direct successor to Julius Caesar, at the same time defining himself against Augustus and Tiberius. Such associations brought with them military glory and this would have been foremost in Gaius' mind. It was a point on which the *princeps* did not measure up to his predecessors, and the deficiency was all the more significant given the obvious disappointment of the German expedition. Gaius needed to salvage credibility and to claim some military kudos for his activities in the north. So, he focused upon Adminius' surrender and determined to make the most of it.

Turning to the episode itself, both Suetonius and Dio convey an atmosphere of militarism and triumph. Suetonius records that, just as Gaius had reacted to Adminius' surrender as if Britain had been handed over to him (*Cal*. 44.2), so the *princeps* appeared at the Channel as if to begin a war (*quasi perpetraturus bellum*; *Cal*. 46). The image is more specific in Xiphilinus' epitome of Dio: Gaius appeared as if to invade Britain, *Ἐς δὲ τὸν ὠκεανὸν ἐλθὼν ὡς καὶ ἐν τῇ Βρεττανίᾳ στρατεύσων* (59.25.1). The sources set the tone with these opening remarks and seek to discredit Gaius' actions by conceptualizing them as akin to real war and to real conquest, illustrated by the use of *quasi* by Suetonius and of *ὡς*, with an emphatic *καί*, by Dio (cf. 59.25.2). On such terms, given subsequent events on the beach, the emperor loses face. But if one views the events as symbolic, deriving meaning from the broader context of Adminius' surrender, the identification of Gaius and his men as a conquering force approximates to what might have been the emperor's intention.

Gaius drew up his soldiers on the shoreline and set-out the usual equipment associated with siege and invasion (Suet. *Cal*. 46; Dio 59.25.2). Dio includes an interesting and important detail. He records that Gaius sailed out onto the Ocean and then returned (Dio 59.25.2; cf. Suet. *Cal*. 47). The act was symbolic of Gaius having extended *imperium* over the ocean, as represented by Adminius' surrender, and, like the dispatches to Rome, was a public gesture laden with imperial propaganda. The emperor's action recalls a similar gesture by Alexander the Great, who in 325 sailed out onto the Ocean off Gedrosia and offered sacrifice to Poseidon and the gods of the sea.[16] Not only could Alexander placate the deities who would protect his fleet on the return journey, but also he could sail on the Ocean he had reached by conquest.[17] Gaius was elsewhere attuned to the precedents of the Macedonian conqueror,[18] and if he had him in mind here, the association would have been particularly apposite.

I would argue that this event was a centrepiece of the coastal enterprise, but that it

[15] After the conquest of Britain, Claudius laboured his extension of Roman *imperium* beyond the Ocean, even in irrelevant contexts such as in his speech on the admittance to the senate of the *primores Galliae* (*ILS* 212, 1.39–40; P. A. Brunt, *Roman Imperial Themes* [Oxford, 1990], 471).

[16] Arrian 6.19.5; *Ind*. 20.10; Plut. *Alex*. 66.1–2; Diod. 18.104.1; Curt. 9.9.27.

[17] A. B. Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire: The Reign of Alexander the Great* (Cambridge, 1988), 139.

[18] Notably, at Baiae; see S. J. V. Malloch, 'Gaius' bridge at Baiae and Alexander-*imitatio*', *CQ* 51 (2001), 206–17.

either was downplayed by the historical tradition in favour of the sea-shells episode, which better fits the preconceived portrait of an unbalanced emperor, or simply came to be overshadowed by the potentially more sensational demonstration on the shore. Gaius' death and Claudius' subsequent conquest of Britain would only have contributed to this, as the symbolism of the gesture came to be quite meaningless; that left the spotlight and interest on the sea-shells. Of the extant sources, Dio's account may therefore retain the true sequence of events. Suetonius, in contrast, does mention this event, but only indirectly and belatedly: notice comes not in *Cal*. 46, but during Gaius' preparations for his triumph, where it is stated that he ordered the triremes he used at the coast to be transported to Rome (*Cal*. 47). Here the episode is deprived of meaningful content and stripped of its immediate context so that a full understanding is beyond the reader's reach. Mentioning it at *Cal*. 46 would have undermined the transition between Gaius' setting up on the shore and his order to collect sea-shells, a transition based upon the emperor's characteristically sudden and irrational behaviour. Suetonius' method here is a good illustration of his careful construction of the narrative. Whereas Dio, judging from Xiphilinus' epitome, seems to allow the events to speak for themselves, Suetonius works hard to position the reader against Gaius and to downplay any apparent rationality which might have manifested itself in the emperor's actions. *Cal*. 46 thus takes on a complexion that suggests Gaius' frivolousness and instability, and makes a greater understanding difficult. The switch in emphasis from Germany to the Channel is quite forced (*postremo quasi perpetraturus bellum*),[19] and then the concern is simply to highlight the emperor's instability (*nemine . . . repente*), the sheer senselessness of his command to the soldiers to pick up *conchae* (*Cal*. 46), and the nonchalant manner in which the emperor fell to preparing his triumph—brought out superbly by Suetonius' simple rendering at the commencement of *Cal*. 47: *conversus hinc ad curam triumphi*. Suetonius' focus on such trivial details as the sea-shells distracts attention from the possibilities of a wider meaning; it is a feature evident in the extreme in later writers like Aurelius Victor (*De Caes*. 3.11–12).

Once back on the shore, Gaius engaged in more militaristic theatrics, giving the signal, again 'as if' for battle, and had the trumpeters urge his men on (Dio 59.25.2). He then made his most famous gesture: he ordered his troops to pick up *conchae*, which should be interpreted with the sources literally to mean 'sea-shells'. Both Suetonius (*Cal*. 46) and Dio (59.25.2–3) indicate that Gaius considered them booty, spoils of the Ocean due to the Capitol and to the Palatine, to be sent to Rome as part of the triumph. What better way to signify the surrender of the British Adminius than by displaying in his triumph sea-shells, collected on the Channel coast, as near as Gaius could then be to Britain, as well as the triremes used to sail out onto the Ocean (Suet. *Cal*. 47)?[20] Not only would they be a part of the triumph, but also could be used in future re-enactments at Rome (cf. Dio 59. 25. 3).[21] The propaganda reached its climax here, and Gaius became elated at his success; the emotion was genuine and should not be misconstrued. Dio notes the mood twice (59.25.3, 4), and it is similarly suggested in

[19] Cf. the beginning of the episode in Xiphilinus' epitome of Dio (59.25.1): it is much smoother and clearly part of a larger narrative.

[20] Hurley ([n. 8], 168) argues that the shells were from the wrong side of the Channel. This would not, however, have compromised their symbolic value; and one wonders just how many Romans would have been able, on sight, to make a similarly discerning observation.

[21] Cf. the later example of Claudius. At Rome, he re-enacted the storming of a town and the surrender of British kings, and was present himself, dressed in a commander's cloak (Suet. *Claud*. 21.6). Claudius might have derived inspiration from Gaius' histrionics.

Suetonius' narrative by Gaius' comments to his soldiers at the conclusion of the proceedings (*Cal*. 46). Further evidence of high spirits are the donative to the soldiers (Suet. *Cal*. 46; Dio 59.25.3),[22] and the order to have a lighthouse erected as a monument to his victory, not an unparalleled act in terms of symbolism,[23] and a lasting reminder of Gaius' intention to exploit the surrender.

Imperial propaganda soon gave way to more practical preparations for the triumph, but it is clear that such propaganda would be a feature of the parade through Rome (Suet. *Cal*. 47; cf. Persius 6.43–7). Suetonius states that Gaius actually entered the city celebrating an ovation and that the triumph had been abandoned or deferred (*Cal*. 49.2). Unless Gaius had truly abandoned the triumph, it is reasonable to infer that an intention to invade Britain—to convert symbolic gestures of extending *imperium* over the Ocean to real acts of conquest—demanded that the greater honour be delayed.[24]

The interpretation offered in this paper remains close to the details of the extant source tradition without becoming distracted by their narrative preoccupations and prejudices. Furthermore, it avoids many of the problems that have undermined modern treatments: Balsdon's mistake of inventing key scenarios, and Woods's of focusing on detail to explain the whole. To reiterate, Gaius received the surrender of Adminius in Germany, but well aware of the propaganda value of the event, transferred the focus to the more appropriate Channel coast. There he continued to make public gestures about the significance of the surrender, the centrepiece of which was his sailing out on the Ocean, representative of his having carried *imperium* across to Britain. Although intending to celebrate a triumph, Gaius changed it to an ovation, the full honour being reserved for the future conquest of Britain. The idea of an invasion had not been planned when Gaius travelled north, but it possibly occurred to him in the aftermath of the surrender of Adminius and the events on the coast. One may surmise that Gaius made much of his intentions, but all was cut dramatically short by conspiracy. The emperor might have been killed but the idea was not. It fell to Gaius' uncle to bring Britain under direct Roman rule.[25]

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[22] Barrett ([n. 8], 137) is right to note that the donative of 100 denarii to each soldier (Suet. *Cal*. 46) was a sum suitable to a largely ceremonial occasion.

[23] Cf. Hurley ([n. 8], 169) who cites Drusus' monument on the Elbe (Dio 55.1.3), to which add Rhamses II's monuments at Thebes in Egypt (Tac. *Ann*. 2.60.2–3); Alexander the Great's altars at the Hyphasis (Curt. 9.3.19; Arr. 5.29.1–2; Diod. 17.95.1); the Parthian king Vardanes' monuments on the river Sindes (Tac. *Ann*. 11.10.2–3).

[24] Cf. Barrett (n. 8), 138. These future plans give fuller significance to the lighthouse. It was not only to guide ships, as Suetonius states (*Cal*. 46), but could become symbolic of Gaius keeping an eye on Britain.

[25] I should like to thank Professor A. B. Bosworth for his advice and support during the writing of this paper, and *CQ*'s referee for helpful criticism.