

DID GALBA VISIT BRITAIN IN A.D. 43?

In his *Vita Galbae* (7) Suetonius informs us that after Gaius' assassination Galba was urged by some to attempt to seize power but declined to do so. Consequently he was much favoured by Claudius, and held in such high regard ('*tantae dignitatis est habitus*') that when Galba was smitten by a sudden, though mild, illness, the emperor postponed the expedition launched against Britain in A.D. 43: '*ut cum subita ei [sc. Galbae] valetudo nec adeo gravis incidisset, dilatus sit expeditionis Britannicae dies*'. The reference to the postponement is clear and unequivocal, and contains nothing scurrilous or titillating that might have persuaded Suetonius to fabricate it. It does not, accordingly, seem unreasonable that modern commentators should, on the basis of this passage, record that Galba was present in Britain in A.D. 43.¹

The notion does, however, present two problems. First, there is the silence of the other sources about the future emperor's supposed presence on the island. Dio, it is to be noted, records a number of minor figures who participated in the campaign and the rewards lavished upon them,² but says nothing about the man who was later to occupy the supreme rank, albeit briefly, in the Roman state. By contrast, Vespasian's presence in Britain is attested, in some detail, not only by Suetonius, but also by Tacitus, Josephus and Dio.³

There is also the difficulty of the apparent absence of any appropriate role for Galba in Britain. Galba was a committed professional soldier, without, at that time, powerful family or political connections, and thus distinct from the various 'hangers on' who accompanied the emperor on the campaign, men such as D. Valerius Asiaticus, brother-in-law of Gaius, or Cn. Pompeius Magnus, son-in-law of Claudius. He first came to notice in a successful campaign in Aquitania and was subsequently appointed commander of Upper Germany by Gaius. There he was brilliantly successful (see below, also) and in A.D. 41, together with P. Gabinius Secundus, commander of Lower Germany, achieved the first great military success of Claudius' reign, which brought the emperor his first acclamation as *imperator* and Galba the *ornamenta triumphalia*.⁴ The same professionalism is evidenced by his next recorded command. At some time in the 40s he was sent to Africa to deal with internal disturbances and a revolt.⁵ So highly was he regarded that he was appointed individually to the position and not chosen by lot. By applying stern discipline in Africa, as he had previously done in Germany, he succeeded in quelling the disturbances. His services in Africa were recognized by a further award of *ornamenta triumphalia*. A soldier with Galba's qualities might well have been considered competent to *command* the expedition to Britain; it is difficult to see how he could have been expected to play an unspecified role subordinate to Aulus Plautius.⁶ Indeed, if he did so, that role, though important

¹ *PIR* 3. 286; *RE* IV A 1. 777. 41. The notion seems to be held generally, among others by: K. Wellesley, *The Long Year A.D. 69* (London, 1975), p. 6; S. S. Frere, *Britannia*² (London, 1978), p. 83; A. Birley, *The People of Roman Britain* (Berkeley, 1980), p. 23, but with reservations in *The Fasti of Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1981), p. 362 (which reached me at the proof stage); G. Webster, *The Roman Invasion of Britain* (London, 1980), p. 90 and myself (though not stated explicitly), *Britannia* 9 (1980), 32. ² Dio 60. 20–3.

³ Suetonius, *Vesp.* 4, Tacitus, *Ag.* 13, *Hist.* 3. 44, Josephus *BJ* 3. 4, Dio 60. 20.

⁴ Dio 60. 8.

⁵ Suetonius, *Galb.* 7.

⁶ As Webster, loc. cit., notes, 'Galba's presence in Britain could therefore have presented difficulties in protocol, unless he came with Claudius as one of his *comites*'.

enough to postpone the expedition, must have been played out in total obscurity. Nor is it convincing to see Galba's presence in Britain as some sort of insurance against a bid for power during Claudius' absence from Rome. Apart from any other consideration, Galba would hardly have been granted his important military command in Africa had his loyalty been suspect.

It might, of course, be argued that these objections, though real, should not outweigh a clear statement in a primary source. But what exactly is Suetonius' testimony? Although Suetonius posits a delay in the campaign, he does not say that Galba actually went to Britain or even that he had any plans for so doing. All we are told is that Galba's illness caused a postponement of the *expeditio*; we are not told that he was expected to join it. Thus it might be useful to consider how the postponement might reasonably have happened *without* the need for Galba's presence in Britain. It is perhaps not without significance that this reference comes at the end of the description of Galba's achievements in Germany. Now the close association between military action in Britain and the security of the German frontier had been appreciated by Gaius and, we can assume, would have been appreciated by Claudius too.⁷ The projected British campaign would be a hazardous one in any case, and its hazards would have been greater still if during its early phases there was any danger of an incursion from Germany. When Gaius came to power in A.D. 37 the German frontier was in a parlous state. The governors of Lower and Upper Germany were, respectively, L. Apronius and his son-in-law Lentulus Gaetulicus. Their tenure had not been a success. Apronius had suffered an enormous defeat at the hands of the Frisii and by his incompetence had allowed a number of prisoners to be taken.⁸ In A.D. 34 Gaetulicus was appointed governor of Upper Germany. He was a lax disciplinarian, who sought to curry favour with his soldiers and had allowed raiders to cross the Rhine and to penetrate into Gaul.⁹ This was the situation that was to bring Galba to prominence. Gaius visited Germany in person in A.D. 39, removed Gaetulicus (charging him with treason) and replaced him by Galba. It was probably at this time also that Apronius was replaced by P. Gabinius Secundus. Galba imposed rigorous discipline on his troops, who circulated the tag 'disce miles militare, Galba est, non Gaetulicus';¹⁰ his measures were to lead to his impressive victories over the Germans. The necessity for rigid discipline in fact went beyond the mere need for frontier defence. Three of the legions used in the Claudian invasion came from the German frontier (II and XIV from Upper, XX from Lower); in using them it is likely that Claudius was pursuing a strategy first determined by Gaius.¹¹ Already in A.D. 39 the German frontier had become a mustering point for an enormous army,¹² troops who would have been trained in preparation for direct participation in the invasion of Britain or to take over the defensive role left vacant by those soldiers removed from Germany for the campaign.

That Claudius would have been sensitive to the need for a secure German frontier as a prelude to his British campaign is suggested by a passage in his famous speech on the Gauls preserved at Lyons, in which he describes a military situation that offers

⁷ For a convenient exposition of the close link between Britain and the German frontier, see J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *The Emperor Gaius* (Oxford, 1934), pp. 76–95; it might be noted, for the record, that Balsdon places Galba in Britain in A.D. 43 (p. 195).

⁸ Tacitus, *Ann.* 4. 73.

⁹ Tacitus, *Ann.* 6. 30; Dio 59. 22.

¹⁰ Suetonius, *Galb.* 6.

¹¹ Legions XV and XXII Primigeniae replaced the German legions that were used by Claudius in his British campaign. See Balsdon, *JRS* 24 (1934), 13–16, on the suggestion that these legions were raised for that purpose not by Claudius but by Gaius before him.

¹² Suetonius, *Calig.* 43, Dio 59. 22.

a strategic parallel to his invasion of Britain.¹³ He notes that his father Drusus had been able to launch the expedition against the Germans because he could feel secure in the protection that a settled Gaul offered to his rear: 'securam a tergo pacem praestiterunt'. Had Galba remained in his German command in A.D. 43 (we have no clear evidence of when it was terminated) he could have played a crucial, though indirect, role in the campaign, one that might be measured by the fact that the theatre that he commanded apparently remained uneventful. His task, for which he was perfectly fitted, would have been to ensure that there would be no repetition of the disaster suffered under Gaetulicus, when the Germans crossed the Rhine into Gaul. Such an incursion, in the initial phases of the campaign, would not only have threatened Roman supply lines but also could have cut off the army (and the emperor) on the island. A brief illness of Galba might, in such circumstances, have led to thoughts about the postponement of the invasion. Suetonius' testimony, then, cannot be used to prove that Galba was in Britain in A.D. 43, and the weight of evidence is in fact against his presence there.¹⁴

University of British Columbia

A. A. BARRETT

¹³ See E. M. Smallwood, *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Gaius, Claudius and Nero* (Cambridge, 1967), p. 99.

¹⁴ The length and precise circumstances of any delay in the invasion (if, indeed, there was such a delay) must remain separate issues, but it should perhaps be noted that Suetonius' remark could supply a rational explanation for the garbled account in Dio (60. 19) of the refusal of the Roman soldiers to advance beyond the Channel. Many of the 'mutinous' troops would have served under Galba in Germany and would have remembered how vulnerable north Gaul was before he assumed command. They (or, indeed, Aulus Plautius, their commander) might have been unwilling to undertake the invasion until there was an assurance that Galba was well enough personally to ensure that they would be protected in their rear.