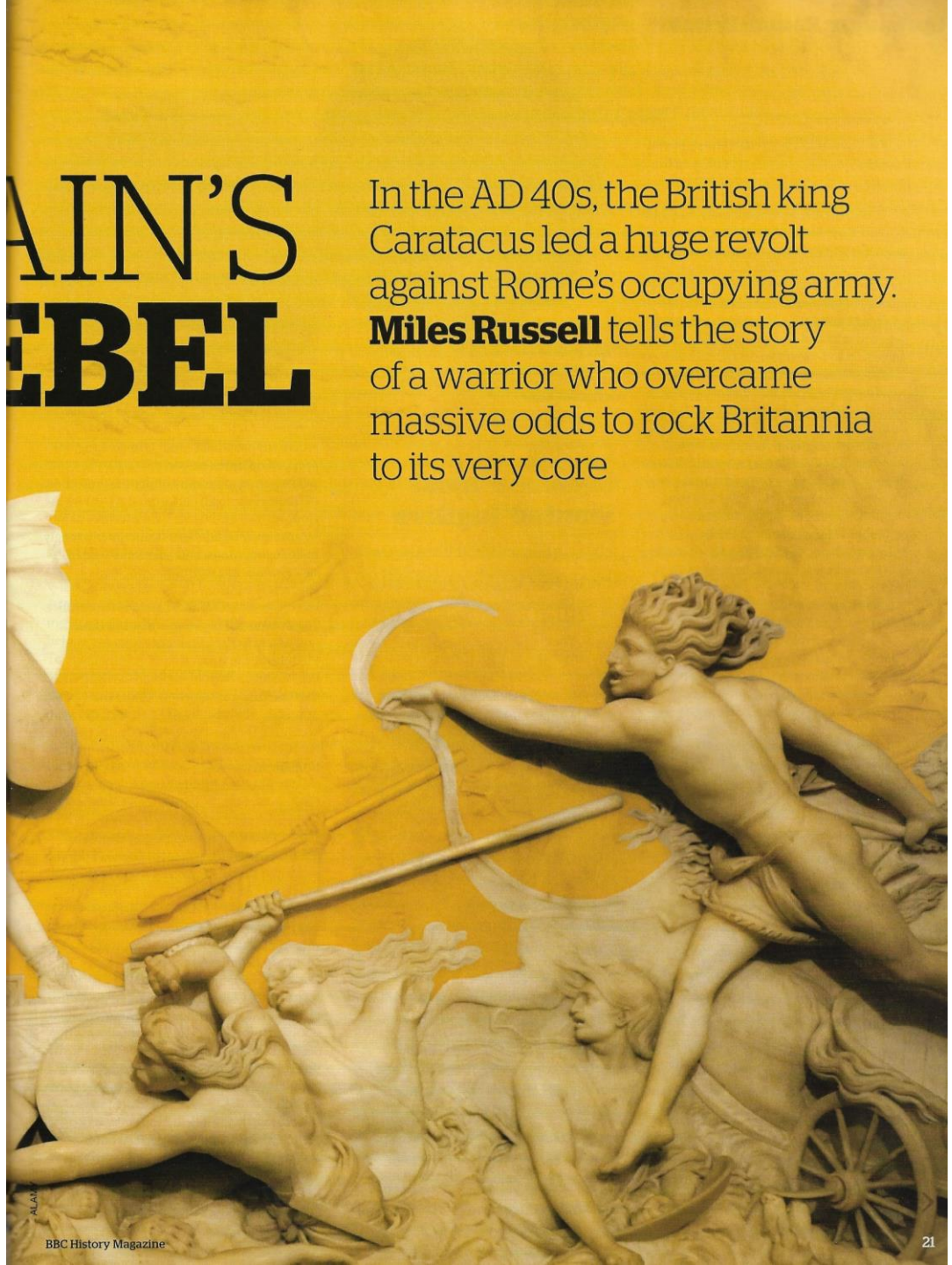
COVER STORY

ROMAN BRITAIN'S GREATEST REBEL

In the AD 40s, the British king Caratacus led a huge revolt against Rome's occupying army. **Miles Russell** tells the story of a warrior who overcame massive odds to rock Britannia to its very core

A relief by the 18th-century sculptor John Deare depicts Julius Caesar's invasion of Britain. Emperor Claudius's attempts to pacify the island a century later met with an insurgency that raged from the Thames to the mountains of Snowdonia



As dawn broke, the Roman army could be seen massing by the river bank: a well-ordered and regimented mass of legionaries, sunlight reflecting from helmets and body armour. At a given signal, the front rank moved forward, wading down into the water, seemingly impervious to the barrage of spears and sling stones. As they emerged on the other bank, the projectiles began to take their toll, many falling back onto their comrades, concussed and eyeless.

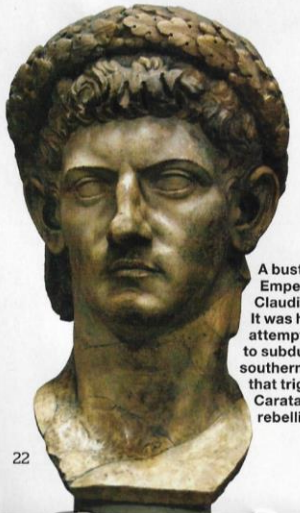
With a deafening roar, a wave of spear-wielding Britons careered downslope before the legionaries had time to regroup. The first Romans were slaughtered, but more followed on behind. Eventually, locking shields together and advancing with swords drawn, they were able to press forward into the angry mass of the native warrior elite. The wild, chaotic energy of the Britons began to falter before the calm efficiency of the Roman killing machine. The year was AD 51 and the first battle for Britain was entering its final bloody stage.

It was eight years since the Roman legions had established a foothold in southern Britain. Most of the native tribes had submitted quickly, only too happy to ally themselves to the Mediterranean superpower. Some, however, had actively resisted the invaders, sensing they had nothing to gain through surrender. Many of those who had taken up arms had died on the battlefield, but others fought on, engaging in the tactics of guerrilla war such as ambush, targeted assassination and the burning of crops.

The leader of the insurgency, and target number one for the fledgling Roman provincial government, was not the famous Boudicca (see box right), then an enthusiastic supporter of the Roman cause, but Caratacus, a man who is today often forgotten.

This coin, minted in AD 40–43, shows Caratacus wearing a lion skin like Hercules, and, on the reverse side, a Roman eagle

Caratacus had become a **'most wanted' fugitive** against whom Rome deployed all available resources



A bust of Emperor Claudius. It was his attempts to subdue southern Britain that triggered Caratacus's rebellion

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Caratacus, who spread rebellion from the Thames estuary to the mountains of Snowdonia, is not as celebrated as other British leaders, which is perhaps surprising given that his story is one of resilience and heroic resistance against the odds.

Iron Age mafia don

We know very little of Caratacus the man. None of the historians, writers or cultural commentators of the period provide a detailed description. We *do* know that he was descended from Cunobelinus, a leader described by the Romans as 'Great King of the Britons'. Cunobelinus was a monarch who, in the years before the Roman invasion, controlled vast swathes of territory from his two capitals at Camulodunum (Colchester) and Verulamium (St Albans).

Later immortalised by Shakespeare as Cymbeline, Cunobelinnus was the Iron Age equivalent of a Mafia don: dangerous, politically strong and in full control of all key financial transactions. He was, judging by the images that appeared on his coins, an ardent supporter of Rome – a client king propped up by the emperor.

The period of stability under the protection of Rome came to an end around AD 40 when Cunobelinus died. He left at least three heirs – Amminus, Togidubnus (sometimes wrongly spelt Togodumnus) and Caratacus – and a succession crisis. Amminus, who had apparently controlled Kent, fled to Rome, leaving Togidubnus and Caratacus in conflict. Togidubnus did not mint coins, but those manufactured by Caratacus displayed solid Mediterranean images, such as Hercules, Pegasus and a Roman eagle, all of which show that the king was somehow 'under the influence' of Rome. By AD 43 Caratacus was becoming the most successful king in Britain, but his swift rise to power was unsettling his Roman paymasters.

South-eastern Britain was a valuable trading asset for the emperor and an important buffer zone, protecting the northern shore of the Roman empire. Any degree of political uncertainty here threatened both the peace and the economy, and it was in the interests of Rome to resolve any crisis as swiftly as possible. Ultimately, it appears it was political instability that persuaded the emperor Claudius of the need for regime change in Britain and the deployment of Roman sandals on the ground.

In AD 43, Claudius's representative, Aulus Plautius, led an expedition to Britain to resolve the succession crisis that followed the death of Cunobelinus. Plautius, we are told by Roman writer Dio Cassius, prevailed over both Caratacus and Togidubnus, urging both to comply with the wishes of the emperor. Unfortunately the negotiations unravelled.

Dio Cassius's account is garbled but it would appear that Claudius supported the cause of Togidubnus – making him a 'Great King' – and relegated Caratacus to a minor role, alienating the Briton and his followers.

There were two riverside battles resulting in significant loss of life, and a crossing of the Thames ending with Togidubnus's army, then helping the Romans, being ambushed and destroyed. Dio Cassius noted that those Britons so far uninvolved in the conflict now "stood together" at Togidubnus's side against his brother Caratacus (believing that the latter needed to be brought to heel). What may have begun as a mission to resolve a political crisis had degenerated into civil war. Alarmed by the state of affairs, Plautius sent word for reinforcements.

Arriving in Britain at the head of the second wave, Claudius led the expeditionary force to the native centre of Camulodunum, where he received the surrender of 11 British kings. Prasutagus of the Iceni, together with his wife Boudicca, were almost certainly among the heads of state who then submitted to the emperor. Although Claudius quickly returned to Rome in triumph, it soon became clear that the conflict was by no means over. Caratacus was still at large and causing trouble.

Best man for the job

In AD 47, Caratacus re-emerged in south-east Wales, stirring up the Silures tribe and co-ordinating their fight against the advancing Roman army. How he obtained power here we do not know, the Roman historian Tacitus noting only that his "successes, partial or complete, had raised him to a pinnacle above the other British leaders". Perhaps he was simply the best man for the job, the Silures realising that he was a seasoned warrior with extensive combat experience fighting against Rome. Perhaps he held some greater power over the clans, derived from his blood heritage or from the support provided by the native religious elite.

Whatever the case, Caratacus soon proved his worth and the legions found themselves fighting a bitter struggle in a difficult and increasingly mountainous terrain. Guerrilla war was something that Roman troops were neither trained nor equipped to deal with and, as supplies and morale dwindled, the situation started to look bleak.

The reappearance of Caratacus livened things up for the new governor of Britain, Publius Ostorius Scapula, whose job it now was to capture the British king dead or alive. Like Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden, Caratacus had become a 'most wanted' fugitive against whom all available resources were deployed in order to ensure identification and capture.

Perhaps fearing that his whereabouts would soon be revealed, or possibly in the hope of opening-up a second front, Caratacus now shifted the theatre of war to the Ordovices in north Wales. Here, so Tacitus says, he

Why Caratacus lives in Boudicca's shadow

The British warrior-queen is a major cultural figure. But is she really deserving of our acclaim?

How did Boudicca's rebellion compare with Caratacus's resistance?

Caratacus led a small but effective band of warriors; an armed resistance movement whose goal was to continually harry the Roman legions and wear down their resolve.

In contrast, Boudicca's insurrection – which broke out in AD 60 or 61 following a dispute between the queen and the Romans over the estate of her recently deceased husband – was an outpouring of hate in which the Iceni tribe rose up to attack a largely civilian population. It was a wild, undisciplined slaughter which proved impossible to control or direct. It was finally put down at the battle of Watling Street, after which Boudicca took her own life.

What were the revolt's targets?

Colchester, the new Roman town of Colonia Claudia Victricensis (the 'City of Claudius's Victory'), was Boudicca's primary target, followed by Londinium (London) and Verulamium (St Albans). Here, all Roman citizens, together with those who had sided with them (or who were thought to have done so), were butchered.

Tacitus said that the rebels killed 70,000 men, women and children. Boudicca's followers, taking "neither captive nor slave", committed atrocities, so we are told, including "the gibbet, arson and the cross". Verulamium, built for the pro-Roman Catuvellauni tribe, was attacked in a deliberate act of ethnic cleansing. Caratacus, flawed though he may have been as a strategist, never sank to targeting civilians in his war of liberation.

Why is Boudicca more famous than Caratacus?

Boudicca's story was revived during the reign of Elizabeth I, when the state was looking for parallels to support the concept of a powerful female monarch. England was threatened by invasion from Catholic Europe so the fight for liberty against an implacable foe chimed with the times. During the reign of Victoria, Boudicca was celebrated as a powerful queen, although the fact that she led native resistance to an empire was played down.

The tale of the Boudiccan war is perhaps more sweepingly dramatic than that of Caratacus, though it is also more bloody, traumatic and filled with what we would today (quite rightly) describe as war-crimes.

A modern illustration shows Londinium's residents being massacred during Boudicca's revolt of AD 60 or 61. Unlike Caratacus, the Iceni targeted civilians, says Miles Russell

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abandoned his policy of guerrilla war and "resolved on a final struggle". We don't know why the king rejected his successful campaign of attrition. Perhaps control over the tribes was beginning to weaken, individual clan leaders tiring of the tactics of harassment. A single battle, striking directly at the legions, would certainly have strengthened the position of the king, convincing doubters that his leadership was sound. Perhaps he also gambled that a heroic stand would either resolve the conflict, or, if it went badly, persuade his allies to resume the 'hit-and-run' strategy of before.

On the face of it, the decision to stand and fight played straight into the hands of his enemy, whose training and resolve made pitched battles an extremely one-sided affair. The fact that it was Caratacus who chose the position for the fight may indicate that he had made plans for a swift escape if the tide of battle turned against him. That the Roman historian Tacitus didn't record a body count following the struggle may suggest that the Britons made a tactical retreat without significant loss of life. We don't know where the battle was fought, for Tacitus is lacking in geographical detail, noting only that Caratacus "selected a position for the engagement in which advance and retreat alike would be difficult for our men and comparatively easy for his own". Having constructed a barrier of stone, the Britons watched the legions of Scapula advance.

Tacitus tells us that, before the battle, Caratacus "flew hither and thither, protesting that that day and that battle would be the beginning of the recovery of their freedom, or of everlasting bondage". In reality, he can't have known what the British king said, but one line certainly rings true, Caratacus appealing to the ancestors "who had driven back the dictator Caesar and by whose valour they were free from the Roman axe". Words and blind heroism were not enough, however. Having surveyed the terrain, Scapula led his troops across the river under heavy fire. Deploying in good order, the Romans cut their way upslope, forcing the Britons to flee.

Tacitus tells us that the captive Caratacus **did not request Claudius's pity** and looked the emperor straight in the eye

Caratacus addresses Claudius in Rome in an engraving of a 1792 painting. The Briton's defiant speech won the respect of his Roman foes

Caratacus escaped but his wife, daughter and brothers (all unnamed in the official Roman account) were captured. Thinking quickly, the king made his way to the Brigantes, a nominally pro-Roman tribe ruling territory in northern England. It may be that he hoped to appeal to an anti-Roman faction here, but instead he fell into the hands of Queen Cartimandua. Realising that where the fugitive went the Roman army was soon to follow, she arrested Caratacus and handed him over to Rome. It was late in AD 51 and, after eight years on the run, he was in the custody of his bitterest foe.

Victory is milked

Tacitus relates the arrival of Caratacus in Rome, and Claudius's attempts to milk the situation for all it was worth. With the population gathered, prisoners of war were marched into the city under guard with cartloads of "ornaments and neck-rings and prizes won". Caratacus, so Tacitus says, did not provide "a downcast look nor a word requested pity". Arriving before the emperor at the tribunal, the Briton looked Claudius in the eye. "Had my lineage and my rank been matched by my moderation in success," he said: "I should have entered this city rather as a friend than as a captive. I had horses and men, arms and riches: what wonder then if I regret their loss? If you wish to rule the world, does it follow that everyone welcomes servitude?" At this, we are told, Claudius pardoned the Briton, no doubt a carefully choreographed manoeuvre that contrasted with the actions of the emperor's predecessors, who usually had their enemies executed.

Caratacus's speech may have been written for him, although given that he was, in his early reign, essentially a pro-Roman client (who may in his youth have even lived in Rome as a hostage), he could no doubt understand Latin, and knew exactly how to speak to an emperor. Much of his address, however, chimes with what we know about Tacitus's own beliefs and attitude, so it could easily be the Roman author's words in the mouth of the captive king.

Caratacus's comment that, had he been "dragged before you after surrendering without a blow, there would have been little heard either of my fall or of your triumph", does seem plausible. Was this a sly dig at Togidubnus who had wholeheartedly gone over to the Roman cause? The relationship of the brothers and their respective attitudes to Roman imperialism may go some way to explain Tacitus's later caustic statement that the loyalty of King Togidubnus was in accordance with Rome's policy of "making even kings their agents in enslaving people".

What ultimately happened to Caratacus and his family, we do not know, but we may picture him ending his days in quiet, if rather opulent, obscurity; a free man to the last. ■

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