

WAR

WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

THE ROLE OF CONFLICT
IN CIVILISATION, FROM
PRIMATES TO ROBOTS

IAN MORRIS

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PROFILE BOOKS

This paperback edition published in 2015

First published in Great Britain in 2014 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London WC1X 9HD
www.profilebooks.com

First published in the United States of America in 2014 by
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

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Grateful acknowledgment is made to the Hal Leonard Corporation for permission to reprint lyrics from “War,” written by Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong, 1969, first recorded by Edwin Starr, 1970, released as a single by Gordy Records (Gordy 7101).
Publisher: Stone Agate Music (from BMI Repertoire).

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84668 418 0
eISBN 978 1 84765 454 0



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THE WASTELAND? WAR AND PEACE IN ANCIENT ROME

The Battle at the Edge of the World

For the first time in memory, the tribes had made peace—Vacomagi with Taexali, Decantae with Lugi, and Caereni with Carnonacae—and every man who could hold a sword was streaming toward the Graupian Mountain. This, the chiefs agreed, was the way the Romans would come. And here, where the highlands dropped down toward the cold North Sea (Figure 1.1), the Caledonians would make a stand that would live in song forever.

We will never know what praise the long-haired Celtic bards heaped on the heroes who fought that day; all their epics are long forgotten. Only a single account of what happened now survives, written by Tacitus, one of the greatest of ancient Rome's historians. Tacitus did not follow the army to the Graupian Mountain, but he did marry the general's daughter, and when we put his description of the fighting together with archaeologists' finds and other Roman writings, we get two things—not only a pretty good idea of what happened when the armies clashed nearly two thousand years ago,* but also a stark statement of the problem that this book tries to solve.

“Men of the North!”

Calgacus was shouting at the top of his lungs, trying to be heard over

*Making sense of ancient battle descriptions is a notoriously thorny problem for historians. I discuss the (many) issues of interpretation in the “Notes” and “Further Reading” sections at the end of this book.

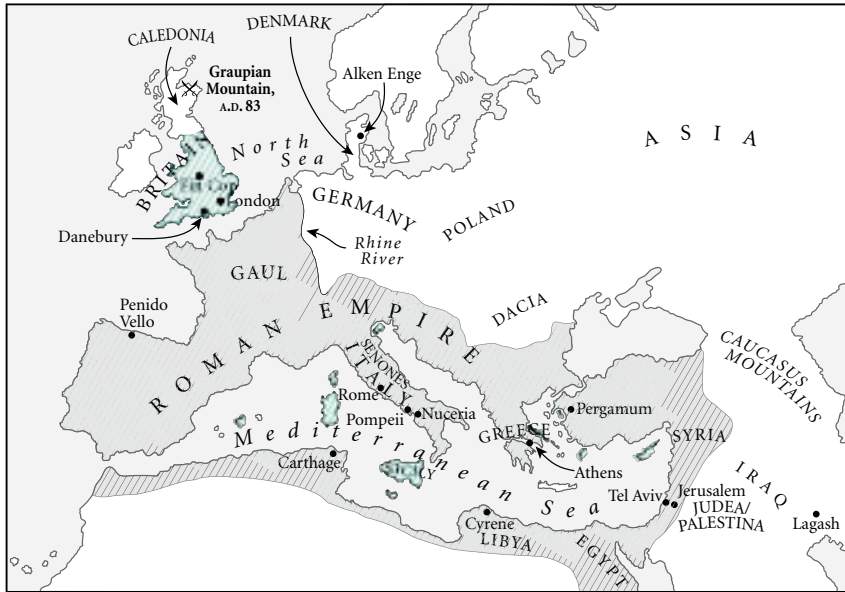


Figure 1.1. The wasteland? The Roman Empire at the time of the battle at the Graupian Mountain, A.D. 83

the chanting of war bands, the braying of copper horns, and the clattering of chariots in the valley below. In front of him were thirty thousand jostling, disorderly men, more than anyone had ever seen in these northern wilds. He raised his arms for quiet but got none.

“Men! Listen to me!” For a moment, the din got even louder as men started chanting Calgacus’s name, but then it dipped slightly, in respect for the great warrior, the fiercest of the dozens of Caledonian chieftains.

“Men of the North! This is the dawn of freedom for Britain! We’re going to fight, all of us in it together. It’s a day for heroes—and even if you’re a coward, fighting’s going to be the safest thing now!” For a moment, the pale sun broke through the leaden northern sky, and cheering interrupted Calgacus again. He threw back his head and roared defiance.

“Listen to me! We live at the end of the world. We’re the last free men on earth. There’s no one else behind us—there’s nothing there except rocks and waves, and even those are full of Romans. There’s no escaping them. They’ve robbed the world, and now that they’ve stolen everything on land, they’re even looting the sea. If they think you’ve got money, they attack you out of greed; if they think you’ve got nothing, they attack you out of

arrogance. They've robbed the whole of the East and the whole of the West, but they're still not satisfied. They're the only people on earth who want to rob rich and poor alike. They call stealing, killing, and rape by the lying name of government! They make a wasteland and call it peace!"

A groundswell of hoarse shouting, stamping feet, and swords clashing on shields swallowed the rest of Calgacus's words. Without anyone giving orders, the war bands started moving forward. Some were in groups of a hundred or more behind a chief, while other men charged forward on their own, dancing with excitement. Calgacus pulled on a chain-mail shirt and ran after his men. The battle was on.

Half a mile away, the Romans were waiting. For six summers, their general Agricola had been looking for a fight, pushing farther and farther north, burning the Britons' homes and crops to goad them into taking a stand. And now, in A.D. 83, as autumn closed in, he had finally got what he wanted: a battle. His men were outnumbered, far from their forts, and at the limits of their supply lines, but it was a battle all the same. He was delighted.

Agricola had drawn his men up in two lines, running straight as rulers without regard for the dips and folds of the land. Out in front were the auxiliaries, fighting for the money (which was good), the hope of plunder (which was better), and the promise of Roman citizenship after twenty-five years of service. On this campaign, most were Germans, hired along the banks of the Rhine. Some were on horseback, covering the wings, but most were on foot. These were no broadsword-swinging tribesmen: standing almost shoulder to shoulder, they carried javelins and short stabbing swords, sweating under thirty-pound loads of chain mail, iron helmets, and shields (Figure 1.2).

In the second line were the even more heavily armed elite citizen legionaries, the best soldiers in the world. Sending away his horse, Agricola took a place with the standard-bearers in front of them.

Just as Agricola had expected, the fight did not take long. The Caledonians surged into the valley, running as close to the Romans as they dared before throwing their spears and scrambling back to safety. Agricola's men were falling here and there, wounded in their unarmored thighs or sometimes killed outright, but the general waited. Only when he judged that enough of the enemy had crowded into the valley to make maneuver difficult did he order the auxiliaries forward.

Some of the Caledonians turned and ran right away. Others stood,

trying to find room to swing their two-handed broadswords in huge arcs that smashed through armor, flesh, and bone, chopping men in two. But the auxiliaries steadily came on, rank upon rank in heavy metal armor, pushing in too near for the scattered highlanders to use their unwieldy weapons. Intimately close, Romans smashed iron-rimmed shields into noses and teeth, drove their short swords through ribs and throats, and trampled their victims in the wet grass. Eruptions of blood clotted thickly on their chain mail and visors, but they kept moving, leaving those in the rear to finish off the dazed and injured.

No plan survives contact with the enemy, the saying goes, and as the Roman auxiliaries pushed uphill, the orderly ranks that had so far made them unstoppable began breaking up. Exhausted, soaked now in sweat as much as blood, they slowed and then stopped. In twos and threes, Caledonian swordsmen turned and stood their ground among boulders and trees. For minutes that felt as long as hours, they shouted abuse at the Romans and threw stones and any remaining spears; then, as their line grew firmer, the bravest edged closer to the invaders. More and more fighters came running back down the slopes, emboldened, and spilled around the Romans' flanks. The auxiliaries' advance ground to a halt. As they felt the tide turning, Caledonian cavalry on mud-spattered ponies came pushing behind the Germans, spearing them in their legs and hemming them in so tightly that they could not fight back.

Across the valley, Agricola still had not moved, but now he gave a signal, and a trumpet blew a new command. His auxiliary cavalry jingled and clattered forward. Neatly, as if on a parade ground, their deep column unfolded into a wide line. The trumpet blew again, and the men lowered their spears. A third time it blew, and the riders kicked their horses into a gallop. Gripping the horses' bellies with their knees (this was five centuries before the coming of stirrups), they leaned into the wind, blood pounding and the thunder of hooves filling their world as they shrieked out their rage.

Here and there knots of Caledonians turned to fight as Roman riders fell on them from behind. There was frantic stabbing, spear against spear, as the Romans rushed past. In a few places, horses crashed straight into each other, spilling riders and steeds to the ground in screaming tumbles of broken legs and backs. But for the most part, the northerners fled, unreasoning panic blacking out every thought but escape. And as the men around them melted away, the fury drained out of those few who had kept their ground. Throwing down their weapons, they ran too.

An army becomes a mob in moments. There were still enough Caledonians to smother the Romans, but with all order gone, hope departed too. Through gorse and stream, across the slopes of the Graupian Mountain, Roman riders speared everything that moved and trampled anything that did not. When trees provided cover, Caledonians would cluster in their shadow, hoping to wait out the Roman storm, but the Roman riders, methodical in the midst of chaos, dismounted, flushed the enemy back into the open, and then resumed the chase.

The Romans kept killing till night fell. By their best guess, they butchered about 10,000 Caledonians. Calgacus was probably among them, since his name never crops up in our sources again. Agricola, by contrast, had not a scratch on him. Just 360 Roman auxiliaries had died, and not even one legionary.

In the darkness, the historian Tacitus tells us, “the Britons scattered, men and women wailing together, carrying off their wounded or calling to survivors. Some fled their homes, and in a frenzy, even set fire to them. Others chose hiding places, only to abandon them straightaway. At one moment they started forming plans, only to stop and break up their conference. Sometimes the sight of their loved ones broke their hearts; more often it goaded them to fury. We found clear signs that some of them had even laid hands on their wives and children in pity—of a kind.”

By the time the sun came up, Tacitus continues, “an awful silence had settled everywhere. The hills were deserted, houses were smoking in the distance, and our scouts met no one.” Calgacus had been right: Rome had made a wasteland and called it peace.

Pax Romana

Winter was coming. With his enemies broken and his army stretched thin, Agricola left the Caledonians to their suffering and led his troops back toward their bases.

The farther south they marched, deeper into territory Rome had held for decades, the less it looked like a wasteland. There were no burned-out ruins, no starving refugees; rather, the Romans saw well-tended fields, bustling towns, and merchants eager to sell to them. Prosperous farmers were drinking Italian wine from fine imported cups, and Britain’s formerly wild warlords had exchanged their hillforts for luxurious villas. They sported togas over their tattoos and sent their sons to learn Latin.

Here was a paradox that might have troubled Calgacus, had he been

alive to see it. To most people on the Roman side of the frontier, though, the explanation for why the Roman Empire was *not* a wasteland was obvious. The orator Marcus Tullius Cicero put it best a century and a half earlier, in a letter to his brother Quintus, who was then governing the wealthy Greek province of Asia (roughly the western quarter of modern Turkey). This was an excellent posting, but Quintus had temper problems, and the provincials under him had been complaining.

After a few pages of stern elder-sibling advice, Marcus's tone changed. The fault, he concluded, was not all on Quintus's side. The Greeks needed to face facts. "Let Asia think on this," he pointed out. "Were she not under our government, there's no calamity of foreign war and civil strife that she'd escape. And since there's no way to provide government without taxes, Asia should be happy to purchase perpetual peace at the price of a few of her products."

Calgacus or Cicero; wasteland or wonderland? These two competing views of the consequences of war, formulated so sharply two thousand years ago, will dominate this book.

In an ideal world, we could settle the debate by just running the numbers. If violent deaths fell and prosperity rose after the Roman conquests, we could conclude that Cicero was right; war was good for something. If the results came out the other way, then obviously Calgacus understood his age better, and war made only wastelands. We could then rerun the test on later periods of history in Chapters 2–5, coming to an overall conclusion about what—if anything—war has been good for.

But reality is rarely that convenient. I mentioned in the introduction that building databases of deaths in battle has grown into a minor academic industry, but few reliable statistics go back past A.D. 1500, even in Europe. Only one kind of evidence—the physical remains of our bodies, which often carry telltale traces of lethal violence—has the potential to span every period, going back to the origins of humanity itself. One day we can expect to have reliable statistics from this source, but right now the problem is that not many scholars have made large-scale studies of this complicated, technically challenging material, and even when they have, the picture remains rather unclear.

One study (published in 2012) of skulls in collections at Tel Aviv University, for instance, found precious few differences in levels of violence across the last six thousand years. A 2013 analysis of skeletons from Peru, however, found spikes in violence in periods when bigger states were being formed (roughly 400 B.C.–A.D. 100 and A.D. 1000–1400)—which is roughly consistent

with this book's arguments. Until we have far more of this evidence, all we will be able to do for periods before A.D. 1500 (and in some parts of the world, even into our own century) is bundle together all kinds of evidence, including archaeology, literary anecdotes, and anthropological comparisons, with—once in a while—some actual numbers.

This is a messy business, made even messier by the sheer scale of the Roman Empire. By Calgacus's day it sprawled across an area half the size of the continental United States and contained about sixty million people. Roughly forty million (Greeks, Syrians, Jews, Egyptians) lived in the complex, urban societies of its eastern half, with another twenty million (Celts and Germans) in the simpler rural and tribal societies of the west.

We have already heard Cicero's views on the violence of Greek Asia before the Roman conquest, and other writers made the barbarians (as Romans dismissively called them)* of the west sound even worse. Fights, raids, and battles were everyday activities, the Romans said, and every village was fortified. While a Roman gentleman might feel underdressed without his toga, a German felt naked without his shield and spear. The barbarians, Romans insisted, worshipped severed heads, which they liked to hang outside their front doors (suitably treated with cedar oil to stop them from smelling). They sacrificed humans to their angry gods, and sometimes even burned them alive inside wickerwork statues. Tacitus was blunt: "Germans have no taste for peace."

Small wonder, then, that Cicero and his peers thought Rome was doing its neighbors a favor by conquering them. And it is equally unsurprising, some historians suggest, that when modern classical scholarship took shape in the eighteenth century, most of its towering intellects agreed with the Romans. Europeans liked to think that they too were doing the world a favor by conquering it, and so the Romans' arguments struck them as eminently reasonable.

On the heels of Europe's retreat from empire in the later twentieth century, however, classicists began wondering about the Romans' gory picture of the people they conquered. Ancient imperialists, some scholars suggested, might have been just as eager as the modern version to paint their victims as uncivilized, corrupt, and in general need of conquest. Cicero wanted to

*Romans borrowed this condescending catchall label for foreigners from Greeks, who claimed to think that other languages sounded like people saying "bar bar bar." One of the ironies, lost on no one, was that most Greeks included Romans on the list of barbarians.

justify exploiting Greeks; Caesar, to make attacking Gaul (roughly modern France) look necessary; and Tacitus, to glorify his father-in-law, Agricola.

Taking Caesar's word that the Gauls needed conquering might be as unwise as simply swallowing whole Rudyard Kipling's now-notorious claim (which I will come back to in Chapter 4) that governing new-caught, sullen peoples was the white man's burden. Fortunately, though, we do not have to take the Romans' word for anything, because plenty of other voices survive too.

In the eastern Mediterranean, literate upper-class Greeks wrote their own accounts, sometimes fawning on the Roman conquerors, sometimes fiercely anti-imperialist. The surprising thing, though, is that they all present much the same grim picture of a prequest world full of failed states, vicious pirates and bandits, and spiraling wars, uprisings, and rebellions.

Take, for instance, an inscription carved on the base of a statue set up in honor of the otherwise unknown Philip of Pergamum in 58 B.C. (Pergamum was in the province of Asia, and 58 B.C. was just one year after Quintus Cicero's stint as governor of Asia ended; Quintus and Philip would almost certainly have known each other.) Among various good deeds, it tells us, Philip had written a history, intended as "a narrative of recent events—for all sorts of sufferings and constant mutual slaughter have gone on in our days in Asia and Europe, in the tribes of Libya, and in the cities of the islanders." Philip apparently agreed with the brothers Cicero that without the Roman presence, Asia would be a bad neighborhood.

In the West, few among the conquered could write, and virtually none of their thoughts survive for us to read, but archaeology suggests that here too the Romans knew what they were talking about. Many—perhaps most—people really did live in walled and ditched forts before the Roman conquest, and while excavations cannot show whether men habitually carried arms, mourners certainly regularly buried their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons with weapons (and sometimes with shields, breastplates, and even complete chariots too). The way they wanted their menfolk remembered was as warriors.

Most spectacularly, Celtic and Germanic gods really did like human sacrifice. Millions of visitors to London's British Museum have seen the most famous example, a disturbingly well-preserved two-thousand-year-old corpse pulled from a bog in Cheshire in 1984 (and immediately nicknamed Pete Marsh). One day in March or April, a decade or two before the Romans arrived in Britain, this lost soul was stunned by two blows to the head, stabbed in the chest, garroted, and, just to be sure, drowned in a bog.

Analysis of his waterlogged gut produced mistletoe, which is how we know what month he died in (the year is harder to fix). Mistletoe was the sacred plant of the Druids, who—according to Tacitus and Caesar—specialized in human sacrifice, which encourages many archaeologists to think that Pete Marsh was the victim of some homicidal ritual.

Altogether, several dozen bog bodies that look as if they were sacrificed (as well as sites where people worshipped skulls) have been dug up, and in 2009 archaeologists found an astonishing two hundred corpses in a bog at Alken Enge in Denmark. Many had been hacked to pieces, and their bones were mixed with axes, spears, swords, and shields. Opinions differ on whether they were slaughtered in a battle or sacrificed after one.

Of course, we might be misinterpreting these finds. Burying weapons with the dead and sacrificing humans in bogs need not mean that war was everywhere; the excavated remains might actually mean that violence had been banished into rituals. And walls and ditches might not have been for defense at all; perhaps they were just status symbols, like the ghastly mock castles that Victorian gentfolk liked to build on their country estates.

But none of this is very convincing. The reason that people poured thousands of hours into digging ditches and building walls was clearly that their lives depended on it. At the most fully excavated fort, Danebury in southern England, the great wooden gates and parts of the village were burned down twice, and after the second conflagration, around 100 B.C., about a hundred bodies—many bearing telltale wounds from metal weapons—were dumped in pits.

Nor was Danebury unique. Grisly new finds keep turning up. In 2011, British archaeologists reported on a massacre site at Fin Cop in Derbyshire, where nine bodies (one of them a pregnant woman) were found in a short stretch of ditch, buried at the same time around 400 B.C. under the fort's collapsed wall. The excavators speculate that dozens—perhaps hundreds—more victims remain to be found.

Cicero was surely right that the pre-Roman world was a rough place, but Calgacus would probably not have disputed this. His point was that conquest by Rome was even worse.

No one really knows how many people were killed in Rome's wars of expansion, which began in Italy in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., spreading to the western Mediterranean in the third century, the east in the second, and northwest Europe in the first. The Romans did not really keep count (Figure 1.3), but the total might have surpassed five million.