

Primary Sources: Julius Caesar's Invasion of Britain

By Julius Caesar, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.07.17

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The landing of Julius Caesar and his Roman army in Britain in 55 B.C. from the book "Story of the British Nation" by Walter Hutchinson published in the 1920s. Photo by The Print Collector/Getty Images

Editor's Note: Julius Caesar led the first Roman invasion of Britain in 55 B.C., and led a second invasion in 54 B.C. Britain extended beyond the limits of the Roman known world, and was expected to be rich in resources, which is why Caesar wanted to invade Britain. The Romans

were not able to conquer Britain, but they made relationships that paved the way for Roman Emperor Claudius' conquest a century later. The following excerpts are from the book the "Conquest of Gaul," which Caesar wrote himself in the third person.

"Made Them A Generous Promise"

Caesar supposed that, if the season left no time for actual campaigning, it would still be of great advantage to have entered the island, observed the character of the natives, and obtained some knowledge of the localities, the harbors, and the landing places.

His purpose had become known and had been reported through traders to the Britons, and deputies came to him from several states in the island with promises to give hostages and to accept the empire of Rome. He heard them, and made them a generous promise, encouraging them to keep their word; then he sent them back home, and along with them he sent Commius, whom he himself, after subduing the Atrebates, had made king over them.

Editor's Note: King Commius had been appointed by Caesar as the leader of the Atrebates tribe in Gaul. He was then sent to Britain to convince the locals to submit to Rome, but he was captured. Meanwhile, Caesar prepared his own expedition.

When about 80 transports had been collected and concentrated, he distributed all the ships of war he had over between his quartermaster-general, lieutenant-generals, and commandants.

"Grounded His Ships Where The Shore Was Even And Open"

Caesar himself reached Britain, and there beheld the armed forces of the enemy displayed on all the cliffs. Caesar waited at anchor for the rest of the flotilla to assemble there and, moving on about seven miles from that spot, he grounded his ships where the shore was even and open.

Editor's Note: Caesar's troops ended up ashore at Pegwell Bay in Kent, England, according to archaeological evidence, but the landing was not easy.

Either standing on dry land or advancing a little way into the water, [the British] boldly hurled their missiles, or spurred on their horses, which were trained to it. Inexperienced in this sort of fighting, our troops did not press on with the same fire and force as they were accustomed to show in land engagements.

The eagle bearer of the 10th Legion [a soldier who carried a bronzed eagle on a staff, the symbol of the Roman legion] cast himself forth from the ship, and began to bear the eagle against the enemy. Then our troops leaped down from the ship. And when the troops on the nearest ships saw them, they likewise followed on, and drew near to the enemy.



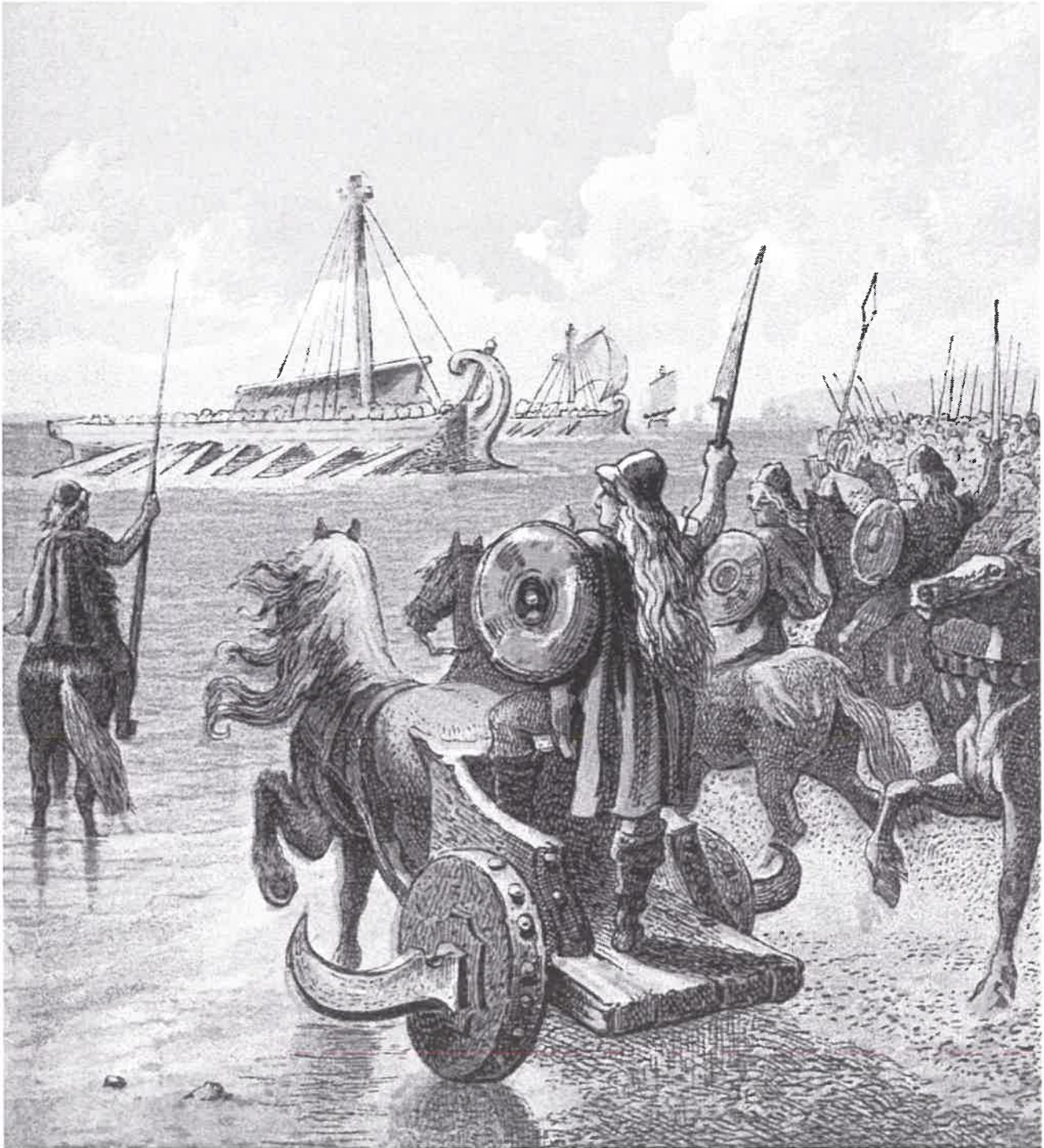
But they could not pursue very far, because the cavalry had not been able to hold on their course and make the island.

Editor's Note: Despite not being able to finish off the British army due to the missing cavalry, Caesar's troops were able to land. A peace delegation was sent to them, promising hostages and returning Commius. Caesar pardons them for "their ignorance" in attacking him despite the arrangements they had made to submit to Rome, but the Roman fleet is soon forced to deal with the harsh British climate.

"Several Ships Went To Pieces"

The tide was found to have filled the warships. Several ships went to pieces. This, as was inevitable, caused great dismay throughout the army. For there were no other ships to carry them back; everything needed for the repair of ships was lacking; and, as it was believed that the army was to spend winter in Gaul, and no corn had been provided in Britain against the winter.

Editor's Note: The British chiefs decide to take this opportunity to restart the war while Caesar's men are busy repairing the ships. The native army sent forth their cavalry and war chariots to meet Caesar's forces. The British used chariots in a way the Romans had never seen before, and Caesar's description amazed readers in Rome.



First of all they drive [the chariots] in all directions and hurl missiles, and so by the mere terror that the teams inspire and by the noise of the wheels they generally throw ranks into confusion. When they have worked their way in between the troops of cavalry, they leap down and fight on foot.

The charioteers in the meantime withdraw close to the battle, and so place themselves with the chariots that, if their masters are overpowered by the number of the enemy, they may have a ready retreat to their own troops.

Britain Came Into Rome's Sphere Of Influence

Editor's Note: Caesar is able to fight off the British army, however, he soon realizes that it is time to return to the continent so as not to risk further storms. The invasion had failed, but would soon be followed by a much larger one in 54 B.C. Even then, the results were mixed, as Caesar was unable to conquer the island despite his military victories. The result of Caesar's invasions was that Britain finally came into Rome's sphere of influence. This would set the ground for the future invasion a century later by Roman Emperor Claudius and the annexation of a part of Britain as an official Roman province.