



The Silures' Defeat of a Roman Legionary Force

ABSTRACT

The only clear ancient narrative for the defeat itself is Tacitus, Annals 12.40: a "legion" under Manlius Valens was defeated by the Silures in the interval between Ostorius' death and the arrival of the new governor Aulus Didius Gallus.[1][2] Tacitus does not identify the legion by number, does not name a battlefield location, and does not say that Valens was killed.[1][2] Modern reconstructions disagree on which legion was involved. Proposals commonly include Legio II Augusta or Legio XX Valeria Victrix, but the identification remains uncertain.[3][4][5] A claim that the Silures "stormed the legionary base at Gloucester and killed the commander in charge" is not found in Tacitus and should be treated as an unverified secondary assertion unless corroborated by additional evidence.[6] Tacitus presents the immediate consequence as widespread Silurian raiding until Didius arrived and repelled them.[1][2]

(c. AD 52)

1. Purpose and scope

This report explores the Silures' defeat of a Roman legionary force shortly after the death of the governor Publius Ostorius Scapula (AD 52). It separates (a) what the ancient source explicitly states, (b) what can be inferred with caution, and (c) what appears to be later interpretation.

3. Primary evidence: Tacitus (Annals 12.40)

Tacitus describes the situation at the transition between governors: after Ostorius died, Claudius appointed Aulus Didius Gallus. Despite a rapid crossing, Didius found that a legion under Manlius Valens had been defeated, and that reports were being exaggerated for political effect. Tacitus specifies that the defeat was inflicted by the Silures and that they carried their forays widely until checked by Didius' arrival.[1][2]

Key points explicitly stated by Tacitus:

- Timing: after Ostorius' death and before (or at) Didius' arrival.[1][2]
- Roman force: a "legion" under Manlius Valens.[1][2]
- Opponent: the Silures.[1][2]
- Immediate aftermath: wide-ranging raiding/forays until dispersed by Didius.[1][2]

4. What can be stated with high confidence

- A Roman legionary force commanded by (Gaius) Manlius Valens suffered a defeat inflicted by the Silures around AD 52.[1][2][3]
- The defeat occurred during the administrative transition from Ostorius Scapula to Aulus Didius Gallus.[1][2][7]
- Tacitus' account is brief: details such as location, tactical circumstances, casualty levels, and the legion's number are not preserved in his text.[1][2]



5. Assessment of key claims in the two briefings

6. Which legion was defeated?

Because Tacitus gives neither the legion's number nor an unambiguous location, identification depends on reconstructing which units were campaigning against (or stationed near) Silurian territory at the time.

6.1 Option A: Legio II Augusta (proposal)

Some secondary accounts identify the defeated force as a detachment (*vexillatio*) of Legio II Augusta. This is possible in principle, but the evidence is indirect: Tacitus does not connect II Augusta to the defeat, and the legion's documented base at Gloucester is later in the first century (commonly associated with the post-Boudican period). As a result, II Augusta should be presented as a hypothesis rather than as a certain identification.[5][9]

6.2 Option B: Legio XX Valeria Victrix (proposal)

A competing reconstruction links the defeated legion to Legio XX Valeria Victrix. This view is associated with prosopographical and administrative studies (including Anthony Birley's discussion of Valens) and with the idea that Legio XX had moved forward into the Severn/Gloucester region during operations against Caratacus and the Silures.[3][4][10]

6.3 Conclusion on legion identity

On the current evidence, the legion's identity cannot be fixed with confidence. In narrative or interpretive work, it is safest to write that "a Roman legion under Manlius Valens" was defeated, while noting (in a footnote or aside) that scholars have proposed either II Augusta or XX Valeria Victrix.[1][2][3][4][5]

7. Where did the defeat occur?

Tacitus provides no place-name. The Silures' ability to 'carry their forays far and wide' suggests a frontier zone where Roman forces, supply lines, and allied communities were exposed.[1][2]

Frequently suggested settings (none certain):

- Within or near Silurian territory in south-east Wales, during fort-building or garrison duty (as implied by Tacitus' earlier description of attacks on Roman forces constructing forts).[7][11]
- The lower Severn / Gloucester area, if a substantial Roman base existed there during the campaign; this is compatible with some modern reconstructions but remains debated.[6][10]
- River valleys and marchland routes (e.g., Wye/Usk approaches) used for raiding and counter-raiding, consistent with the wider pattern of Silurian warfare described by Tacitus.[7][8]

8. Aftermath and significance

Tacitus depicts the defeat as politically and psychologically significant: it was amplified by the Silures to intimidate the incoming governor and exploited by Didius for reputation management.[1][2] Militarily, the immediate outcome was a period of aggressive Silurian raiding until Didius arrived and pushed them back.[1][2] In the longer term, the Silures remained a persistent problem and were not fully subdued until later campaigns in the Flavian period.[8][9]