

The Transformative Power of Mythical Britain in the *Panegyrici Latini*

The *Panegyrici Latini* (*PL*) are a collection of praise speeches delivered to Roman emperors in the late-third/fourth century AD. Britain appears in many of the panegyrics, either briefly or as a main topic. The cumulative description is a consistent one, but never particularly realistic. Actually, in their more grandiloquent moments, the panegyrists speak of a Britain that is impossibly distant and mythological because their image of Britain is derived from a literary Britain already existing in Roman culture, with specific details coming from Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum* and Tacitus' *Agricola*. That image of Britain remained consistent over time as a tool for authors to manipulate for their own purposes. The panegyrists further combine this tool with the political unrest originating in Britain at the time in order to devise a rhetorical strategy which re-fashions civil war into extraordinary conquest and turns rebels into pirates and monsters.

From the time of the Principate “the invasion [of Britain] turned into a focus for praise of the monarch...and a representative manifestation of his power and authority,”¹ but the panegyrists found many ways to capitalize on this rhetorical topos in order to enhance the emperor's power through a network of associations. The mythological and divine features of the land and the people on it are intensified to great effect by the eloquence of the panegyric genre.

As a magical and liminal land, Britain produces equally remarkable beings, good and bad. And the more otherworldly Britain appears, the more it becomes the home of gods and monsters, and thus the greater the status of the emperors in these panegyrics, returning from that furthest corner of the world as conquering heroes.

In contrast, an association with mythical Britain is dangerous for the men who attempted to rebel against the emperor from there. In the rhetoric of the *PL* individuals who resist the emperor in Britain become disassociated with Rome and redefined as ‘other,’ and can even

¹ Stewart, 1995.

undergo mythical transformations equal to the island itself. Enemies of the emperor in Britain can be categorized into two groups, pirates/outsiders or monsters. In the first group it is a case of transgressive behavior. Physically they may look Roman but their actions reveal them to be ‘other.’ With the second group, there is a shift from internal abnormalities to physical ones that are even worse because they are inhuman. In both cases, the identity given to them by the panegyrist demonstrates their evil and sets up the coming victory of the emperor.

The most common term assigned to these enemies in the *PL* is “pirates” (*PL* 10.12.1; *PL* 8.6.1; *PL* 2.26.4). The men who start a rebellion against Julian are “those who were exiled from the world...” (*PL* 2.23.3). Maximus, another rebel, is “himself banished from the world and a fugitive from his fatherland” (*PL* 2.31.1), and a tyrant (*PL* 2.31.2). These terms designate men such as Maximus as ‘other’ and outside the Roman Empire to the panegyric’s audience. Their transformation foreshadows their defeat which will confirm the superiority of the Roman Empire, and especially its leader.

In special cases the enemies of Rome become monsters assimilated into traditional mythology. Through the connections inherent in the famous tales of the gods the panegyrists are able to imply a wealth of meaning by means of a brief analogy, such as in *PL* 10 where the emperor Maximian defeats a monster worse than Geryon, the three-headed shepherd defeated by Hercules. The monster is Carausius, who is also called a pirate in the panegyric. Such an usurper could not be mentioned by name, but the magnitude of the threat needed to be acknowledged in order to display Maximian’s achievement at defeating him. Thus he is worse than one of Hercules’ twelve tasks, making Maximian greater than Hercules himself.² The same powerful associations build up the image of Constantine who, at the end of his campaign in Britain, defeats two usurpers in the forms of dragons (*PL* 4.16.6).

² Rodgers, 1986.

As each speech unfolds the panegyrists confer to Britain the ability to transform those who travel to the island into something other than Roman, or even human. This unifies the audience of the panegyric and the whole Roman Empire by recasting the internal strife of the fourth century AD as direct violence against a foreign and distant enemy. Finally, the panegyrists strengthen this unity by placing an extraordinarily powerful ruler at the helm—the divine emperor, whose easy victories over formidable, mythological, and monstrous opponents serve as reinforcements of his divine rule.

Rodgers, Barbara. “Divine Insinuation in the *Panegyrici Latini*,” *Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Bd. 35, H. 1 (1st Qtr., 1986): 69-104.

Stewart, PCN “Inventing Britain: the Roman Creation and Adaptation of an Image,” *Britannia*, Vol. 26 (1995): 1-10.