Caesar, Meet Tacitus!

Katy Ganino Reddick  
*Frank Ward Middle School*

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Our primary role as educators is to help our students make connections—between themselves and our content material, between our content material and their lives. This paper, based on a talk given at the 2015 CANE Annual Meeting, is not didactic or exhaustive. Instead it is a collection of different ways you can help your secondary students to connect to Tacitus, specifically his short work, *Agricola*. Many of these ideas could also apply to other authors or may inspire you in other directions; feel free to use these as a starting point to make your own connections.

Although Tacitus is often perceived as a challenging author, his short work the *Agricola* is a wonderful companion text for Caesar’s *Bellum Gallicum*. As a short text it is quickly read in English and has very serviceable translations available free both online at various websites and as a Kindle download. Pairing Tacitus with Caesar provides two Roman portraits of Britain at two very different times of Roman expansion. This paper explores ideas about how to incorporate Tacitus and Roman Britain into your Caesar Curriculum. These ideas can be used as a stand alone substitute lesson plan, a short term unit before a vacation, enrichment for students needing an additional challenge, or for use after students have taken the AP exam.

Introduce the *Agricola* with a drawing activity. Challenge your students to draw a map of Britain based on Tacitus’ description of the island, found in *Agricola* 10. For advanced students, you can give them the description in Latin; to keep it light, you can read aloud one of the many translations. For added fun, don’t tell them what island they are drawing. Then share with them some images of Britain from Google Maps and the earliest extant map of Britain, the Gough Map at the Bodleian.
Comparing these maps to those drawn by students can lead to all sorts of interesting conversations about map making and the understanding of geography in the ancient world. To prepare yourself, you might want to read the excellent *The Fourth Part of the World* by Toby Lester and *The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas the Greek* by Barry Cunliffe.

One of the richest elements of the *Agricola* to mine for classroom use is a pair of speeches by Agricola, general of the Roman forces, and Calgacus, leader of the British tribes. Each speech was written by Tacitus to be a model for how each man would rouse his troops. If you have only one class to spend on it, students can do a simple compare and contrast of the two. If you have more time, an entire class could be spent simply discussing the ancient concepts of history that allow an author to invent speeches for historical events. As a follow-up, students could then write speeches they think historical figures ought to have written - perhaps paired speeches for Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis after the battle of Gettysburg. This is a wonderful way to create interdisciplinary projects with social studies colleagues.

Students could also be asked to compare these speeches to a modern coach’s pep talk; perhaps after viewing famous coaches’ speeches. Depending on the current sport season and your class, possible film clips may come from *Miracle, League of Their Own, Rudy, Remember the Titans, Hoosiers,* or *Any Given Sunday.* For footage of a speech given by a legendary coach, show one by Vince Lombardi. While watching the clips, encourage students to notice delivery - inflection, gestures, rhetorical devices. Selected students could then perform Tacitus’ speeches in front of the class (in Latin or English, depending on the expertise of the class) trying to employ some of the same delivery techniques. Afterwards the rest of the class could debate which speech would have been the most motivating.

The speeches use both textual support and using inferences (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1). The two speeches can be looked at in tandem to determine how they interact and build upon each other (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2) or how specific ideas develop over the length of the text (CSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3). In terms of Craft and Structure, students can look at the use of language and literary devices (CSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4), the role of structure in the speeches (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5), and Tacitus’ point of view (CSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6). This might be an excellent opportunity to work with colleagues in your English department to both take advantage of their expertise in crafting such questions and also to support their curricular aims.

Another way for students to experience Tacitus’ and Caesar’s Roman Britain is through fiction. There is a growing body of excellent literature set in the ancient
world. Rosemary Sutcliff wrote a number of novels set in Roman Britain, including *The Eagle*, made into a 2011 film with Tatum Channing, and *Song for a Dark Queen*, a stirring account of Boadicea. Most of her books are appropriate for even a middle school audience. Ruth Downie is up to six novels in her mystery series about a Roman *medicus* stationed in Britain set during the reign of Hadrian (*Medicus* begins the series) - fairly tame but with some adult concepts. Agricola himself appears in noir novels by the renowned Lindsey Davis (*The Body in the Bath House*) and Kelli Stanley (*Nox Dormienda*). Bernardine Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe*, a verse novel set during the reign of Septimius Severus, shows a later Roman Britain from the viewpoint of the daughter of Sudanese immigrants; this book should be reserved for more mature readers.

There are also some wonderful resources that bridge the gap between primary sources and entertainment. A collaborative project between archaeologists and author Caroline Lawrence, at http://www.romansrevealed.com/ contains photographs and artists’ renderings of gravesites from Roman Britain. Through clicking on images of the sites, students hear scholars discuss how bone and dental analysis and grave goods suggest diversity of diets, ethnicities, and socioeconomic classes. Lawrence then uses that information to write short stories envisioning the lives of these ancient Roman Britains.

Another archaeology based resource would be Britain’s reality archaeology show, *Time Team* (available on YouTube). This program, popular in Great Britain, depicts archaeologists uncovering as much as they can about a site in three days. They do background on the site in advance, call on local experts, and use geophysics before digging. Although they research a wide swath of British archaeology, there is a collection of their Roman excavations available on Amazon entitled The Roman Invasion. Most episodes also involve a modern reenactment of a Romano-British custom—cooking an ancient recipe, creating a mosaic, or building a funeral pyre.

Students can use any of these resources as a starting point to research more deeply into life in Roman Britain. Students can research tribes, warfare, daily life, and historical events under Roman rule. Rather than writing a paper or creating a poster, encourage them to create a historical fiction narrative in song, image, app or comic strip. An example can be found at the whimsical *Corgito Ergo Sum*, a project by Justin Shwamm and Tres Columnae that tells the story of a time traveling corgi who was a present from Agricola to his daughter and son-in-law, Tacitus.

Students may also enjoy learning how texts such as the Agricola have survived the ravages of time. *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* by Stephen Greenblatt describes how Poggio Bracciolini, a Renaissance man of letters, scoured
Europe to rediscover ancient texts. Although this book focuses on Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, the *Agricola* was among those texts. As a related project, students could read about the history of the *Germania*, often paired with the *Agricola*. *A Most Dangerous Book* by Christopher B. Krebs chronicles this history of that manuscript and how it was used to foment and fuel nationalism in 20th century Nazi Germany. Again, there are cross-disciplinary connections that can be made with your school’s history department. Or, rather than having students write a traditional book report, challenge them to pull excerpts of these books and create Common Core assessment questions with them.

If you examine the dates of the books, films, and websites listed at the end of this paper, you may be surprised to see so many with dates within the last decade. Although the average person on the street or student in the Latin classroom may not have heard of Tacitus, the world which he recorded for us has informed our own and is continuing to play a lively part in today’s intellectual discussions. By introducing your students to Tacitus, you can both add to their classical knowledge and also connect them to ideas and discussions in other disciplines.
Resources:


_________. *The Eagle*. 2nd Square Fish ed. New York: Square Fish, 2011.

*Time Team: Unearthing the Roman Invasion*. Athena, 2012. DVD.