

THE BATAVIAN

In the year A.D. 69, a revolt broke out in the northwest corner of the Roman Empire. It began in Batavia, a land of sand dunes and hummocks and islands surrounded and often flooded by the meandering Rhine and the Waal and the Maas as these rivers turned west to find their way across what we now call the Netherlands and issue into the North Sea. It spread with alarming speed from the Rhine delta upriver to beyond Basel, in the Swiss Alps. The great Roman historian Tacitus chronicled the uprising from start to finish—or almost, for the manuscript of his *Histories* breaks off in the middle of peace talks being held on a bridge whose middle section has been cut away, leaving a gap, on one side of which stands the Roman commander; on the other, the Batavian nobleman who instigated the revolt.

Then came a gap of another kind. Tacitus's manuscript slipped from view for a millennium and a half, resurfacing during the Renaissance. The Batavians, too—"the most conspicuously brave of all the German tribes in Gaul"—seemed to have vanished, as if swept away by the very rivers that had served them as defensive moats. With the publication of *The Histories*, first in Latin, in about 1520, then in Dutch, this long-lost people reappeared just in time to be transformed into freedom fighters, as their revolt against Roman rule was artfully inflated into an inspiring myth during the Dutch war of independence against Spain, the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648).

Julius Caesar was the first Roman general to come into contact with the

The onrushing Batavian army leaves dead and dying Roman legionaries in its wake in what is today the Netherlands. This early-seventeenth-century painting was one of a series by Otto van Veen that the nascent Dutch nation commissioned to celebrate its ancient independence.



by Jon Swan

REVOLT



In A.D. 69, a nation whose men were prized by emperors for their fighting prowess rose up against Rome in a revolt that convulsed the empire, from the North Sea to the Alps.



LEFT: OTTO VAN VEEN/RIJSMUSEUM, STICHTING, AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS; ABOVE RIGHT: NOORBRABANTS MUSEUM, 'S-HERTOGENBOSCH, NETHERLANDS

Batavians, whom, like Tacitus after him, he lumped together with the Germans. Taller than the legionaries from the Mediterranean, less flighty and garrulous than the Gauls, less likely to get drunk and lose all sense of discipline than the Germans, these lowlanders, wetlanders, netherlanders of mixed Celtic-Germanic descent were formidable fighters, at home on horses, at home in the water. As Tacitus notes of a specially trained Batavian cavalry unit: "These men were capable of swimming the Rhine while keeping hold of their arms and mounts, and maintaining perfect formation." The Batavians appear to be among the tribes or people whom Tacitus elsewhere describes as playing at riding as children, competing in riding as grown men, and adds, "even the old will not give it up." The fact that the Batavians' legs were longer than those of the Mediterraneans, while their horses were smaller than the Romans' Spanish and Gallaecian mounts, may have contributed to their universally recognized superiority as cavalymen.

Tall, tough, and good-looking—Roman barbers, impressed by their long, blond hair, introduced Batavian-style hairdos and a hair-lightening rinse—Batavians formed the backbone of bodyguards maintained by Roman emperors from Julius Caesar to Vespasian. In other words, they did so up to the year A.D. 69, a year of almost continuous civil wars, the Year of the Four Emperors, and the year a Batavian nobleman called on his countrymen to rise up against one of the four, the emperor Vitellius.



The region of Batavia (left) lay on two large islands between the Rhine and Waal Rivers. The exact location is unknown, since the rivers have changed course many times over the centuries. This sliver was the epicenter from which the shock waves of revolt would radiate.

A belching, backslapping general who had made himself popular with the army of lower Germany during his tenure as governor, Vitellius was the newly crowned emperor who, to make a long story short, had just succeeded Otho (who committed suicide), who had succeeded Galba (murdered), who had succeeded Nero (another suicide). He came to power in the spring of that year, which, in Tacitus's words, "brought about . . . the near-destruction of Rome," and did not live to see the end of it.

The Batavian nobleman—"of royal descent," Tacitus writes—who instigated the revolt was Julius Civilis. (Only his Roman name has been preserved.) Both he and his brother, Claudius Paulus, had served for years as officers in the Roman army. Civilis had presumably entered military service at the age of eighteen; he had served for the full twenty-five-year term of enlistment (or so he says in an eloquent speech recreated by Tacitus); and he commanded an auxiliary cohort of 500 Batavians.

Few other peoples within or on the fringes of the Roman Empire were given command of their own cohorts. This privilege had been granted the Batavians shortly after they had moved, at the urging of the Romans,

from their homeland on the east bank of the Rhine, in today's north Hesse, to a riverine region in Upper Belgica, whose indigenous population Caesar had sought to exterminate. "This race of criminals," as Caesar called the Eburones, merited "total annihilation" for having had the temerity to put up a stiff resistance to the northward-pushing Roman legions. So there was ample room for new settlers in Upper Belgica.

As it happened, the Batavians were eager to move. Tacitus, who describes them as a "branch" or "section" of the Celtic Chatti, hints that relations between the two groups were strained to the breaking point. Meanwhile, the Romans held out inducements. The Batavians would not be "subjected to the indignity of tribute"—Tacitus's words—nor would they be taxed. They would be "reserved for employment in battle . . . like weapons and armor—only to be used in war." Tacitus refers to this agreement as the Batavians' "ancient alliance with us"—a term the seventeenth-century Dutch jurist Huigh de Groot, or Grotius, seized on to back up the claim that Batavia had been an independent nation since antiquity.

The Batavians chose as their main place of settlement two long islands

whose banks were washed by the Rhine and the Waal, the southern, roughly parallel branch of the Rhine. The region between the two rivers was and is still known as the Betuwe, meaning, perhaps, "fertile ground." (The connection between the name of the region and that of its new occupants remains a subject of scholarly dispute.)

The settlers had new neighbors: to the west, along the North Sea coast, the Cannenefates; to the northeast, the Frisii, or Frisians. And they had an assignment: to defend their stretch of the border, to serve as a buffer against the Germans.

It was an assignment no Roman legionary would be keen to volunteer for: water, water, everywhere, including drenching rains and chilling mist. Long winters. Sleet, snow. And not a town or tavern in sight. The Batavians were welcome to it.

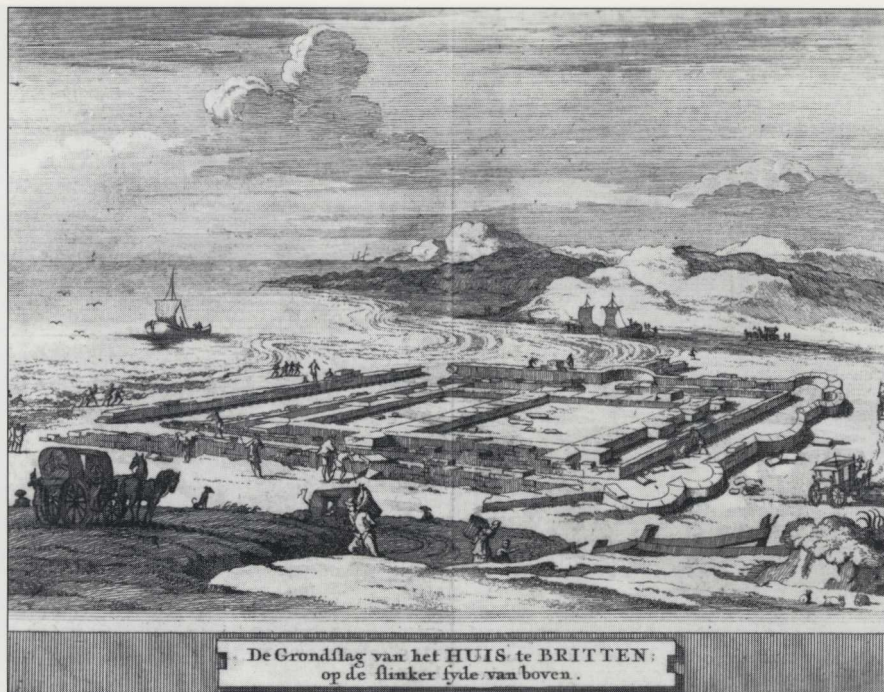
For nearly a century, thousands of Batavian recruits served with distinction, and their loyalty was beyond question. They had served in the imperial bodyguard—often called the Batavian guard. They had taken part in several campaigns against the Germans be-

tween the Rhine and the Elbe, under Drusus and Tiberius and Germanicus.

Meanwhile, as the Roman generals and emperors made preparations for launching their ambitious campaigns, the Batavians found their rivers filling up with Roman vessels and their riverbanks turned into shipyards and naval bases.

The Roman presence began to make itself felt in the region around 15 B.C., when Drusus was sent north by Augustus, whose ambition it was to extend the empire east of the Rhine to a new river border: the Elbe. In preparation for this offensive, a chain of fortifications was constructed along the Lower Rhine and at strategic points such as Nijmegen, whose bluffs offered a commanding view of the wide Waal and the flatlands through which it meandered. There, in about 15 B.C., a camp large enough to station two legions, or 12,000 men, was set up on the plateau extending along the edge of the bluff. Five years later, recent excavations show, this huge (forty-two hectares) camp was abandoned, and a smaller fort, boasting an imposing 2,000-square-meter praetorium, or commander's residence, was set up farther down the plateau. The fort appears to have served as Drusus's staff headquarters during the first of his German campaigns.

Drusus's plan was to catch the Germans by surprise—and spare his men a lot of risky overland marching—by landing troops at the mouths of the Ems and Weser Rivers, then pushing inland. The quickest way up to the shoulder of the German coast that extends eastward to the long neck of the Danish peninsula was through the Flevo Sea, later called the Zuider Zee. To move his troops in shallow-draft transport ships from the Rhine to the Flevo, Drusus ordered the construction of the *fossa Drusiana*, or Drusus Canal. Where was it, and was it really a canal? Most scholars think the canal was a north-running branch of the Rhine—most likely the IJssel—whose banks were diked to control its flow and make it navigable for Drusus's troop ships.



Bastions of empire such as this Roman grain depot, built about A.D. 40 at the mouth of the Rhine, would eventually provoke the Batavians and help fuel their rebellion.

Drusus's son Germanicus made use of his father's canal in A.D. 14, when he resumed the campaign to expand the empire and punish the Germans, who, five years before, had drawn three ineptly led legions and six auxiliary regiments, numbering in all 25,000 men, into the Teutoburg Forest, where they were ambushed and massacred. Germanicus ordered the construction of some 1,000 transport ships on the Rhine, moved his army north through the canal, and managed to kill and take prisoner enough Germans to claim that Rome had avenged the loss of the legions and subdued the tribes between the Rhine and the Elbe. Like most such body-count claims, it was a hollow one.

Increasingly, then, Roman commanders were using Batavia as a command center and staging area—their engineers, along the way, perhaps giving the inhabitants advanced lessons in water management. The emperor Claudius felt similarly free to reshape portions of the low-lying lands along the North Sea coast as he prepared to invade Britain in A.D. 43. There is evidence that a canal was dug to link the Rhine and the Maas with the Scheldt to the south, behind the coastal dunes. It appears to have been used to link

coastal military bases and for the transport of men and materiel in a cross-Channel operation involving some 40,000 soldiers, including 4,000 Batavians and Cannenefates.

Beneath the ever-shifting underwater dunes near the mouth of the Old Rhine, at Katwijk aan Zee, there lies a large Roman building that scholars believe was used as a grain depot during the British campaign. Centuries ago, the fortlike structure vanished beneath the encroaching sea, but from time to time strong offshore winds have combined with unusually low ebb tides to expose it. In the early 1700s, the winds blew hard and long enough to permit artists to scurry to the coast and draw what they saw. The Dutch called the battlemented structure Huis te Britten or Brittenburg, because it resembled a castle, or *burg*, and was built on a point of land close to Britain.

This far-out point, incidentally, served as the setting for the madcap conclusion of the sole foreign campaign undertaken by Claudius's predecessor, Gaius, better known as Caligula. The campaign was triggered by an aide's offhand remark that the emperor needed fresh Batavian recruits for his bodyguard. Responding with manic enthusiasm, Caligula swiftly



In A.D. 68, the Batavian nobleman Julius Civilis and his brother, Claudius, were arrested by the Romans on trumped-up charges. Julius (being led away) was imprisoned; Claudius was beheaded. Once freed, Julius would make the Romans pay.

assembled a large army, hurried north along the Rhine, and, upon reaching the North Sea, gave the astounding order, "Gather seashells!" According to Suetonius, who recounts the scene in *The Twelve Caesars*, the troops duly filled their laps and helmets with what their commander inventively called "plunder from the ocean."

It was in the late 60s, in the latter years of the reign of another madman, Nero, that the Roman presence in the Rhine delta began to seem onerous. Claudius had ordered a halt to all expeditions north and east of the Rhine; henceforth, he said, the river would mark the limit of the empire in the region. As a corollary, the chain of forts extending from the North Sea east to Nijmegen and Xanten, and south to Bonn and Cologne, was to be strengthened. The result was that the Batavians were now effectively penned in, or more effectively protected,

depending on one's point of view. Meanwhile, the periodic levies of recruits—each time, another 500 young men in the best physical condition—were straining the ancient alliance.

Then, in the year 68, everything happened at once. An uprising in Gaul was put down, only to be followed by civil war. Galba's Spanish legions marched on Rome. Nero, terrified, committed suicide. Galba, suspecting the loyalty of his Batavian bodyguards, sent them back home, "repatriating them without a bounty," Suetonius notes, and creating further trouble among troops on the Upper Rhine by failing to reward them for helping to suppress the Gallic revolt. These troops were among the first to refuse to swear allegiance to Galba, whose ascent to power marked the end of the Julian-Claudian dynasty. Henceforth, the legions, not the senate, would determine who would rule.

It was during the last days of Nero's misrule that the governor of Lower Germany arrested Julius Civilis and executed his brother on "a trumped-up charge of rebellion"—the words are those of Tacitus—and sent Civilis in chains to Nero. By the time the Batavian nobleman arrived in Rome, Nero was dead. The new emperor, Galba, who had less than seven months to live before he would be assassinated, acquitted the prisoner, and Civilis returned home—an embittered veteran.

With the downfall of Galba and, in short order, of Otho, Civilis became a rebel with a plausible pretext for staging a rebellion, albeit disguised as something quite different. Vitellius was now emperor, but several legions—in Egypt, the Middle East, and the Balkans—had already come out in support of Vespasian, a general who had come up through the ranks and who was, at the

time, governor of Judaea. Civilis would present himself as a friend and supporter of Vespasian, under whose command he had probably served in Britain. How could the Batavians help Vespasian? By starting a diversionary war that would prevent Vitellius from drawing off more troops from Lower Germany to support his struggle to stay in power.

Civilis invited a group of Batavian nobles, many of them probably fellow veterans, "to a sacred grove, ostensibly for a banquet," Tacitus writes. After darkness fell, he rose and stated the case for revolt. Formerly, he said, the Romans had treated the Batavians as equals; now they treated them as chattel. Recruiting sergeants were calling up overage Batavians in order to exact bribes for their release, while good-looking Batavian boys were being dragooned into service to serve the lust of the Romans. The large new levies ordered by Vitellius to replace the thousands of soldiers withdrawn from the Rhine frontier and Britain would soon part children from their parents, brothers from brothers. The legion camps along the Rhine were undermanned; the empire was divided against itself; the time had come to act.

His listeners agreed, wholeheartedly, and swore an oath of loyalty. The neighboring Cannenefates were then approached, and they, too, joined in the conspiracy. Agents were dispatched to win over the Batavian and Cannenefates cohorts that, recalled from Britain and already on their way to Rome, had gotten as far south as Mainz. Ordered to continue on their way to Rome, they demanded a bounty and double pay—and kept upping the ante. Then they mutinied and headed north to their homeland.

There were, perhaps, 2,000 of them. Ahead of them lay Bonn, where more than 3,000 pro-Vitellian legionaries were stationed. The Batavians sent an envoy ahead. We're not waging a war against Rome, he said; we're just tired of fighting and want to go home. We're not looking for a fight, but if you won't let us pass, we'll have no choice.

The Roman legate decided to fight. His men, however, proved no match for the battle-hardened, highly motivated



RÖMISCH-GERMANISCHES MUSEUM, COLOGNE, GERMANY

The Batavians were renowned for their horsemanship. This first-century A.D. gravestone found near Cologne memorializes a Batavian cavalryman in action.

Batavians, and soon "the ditches were choked with bodies." The home-bound veterans marched on, making a wide swing around Cologne, where they could expect stiffer opposition. Their arrival in the Betuwe, as Tacitus notes, "meant that Civilis now commanded a proper army."

While the Batavian force was moving north, the Cannenefates and Frisians began attacking Roman forts near the mouth of the Rhine. Cohort-prefects, mostly Gauls, now began torching their undermanned frontier forts to prevent them from falling into the hands of the insurgents.

Hoping to contain the rebellion, the Romans assembled ships near the eastern end of the Betuwe, but the defection of auxiliaries, followed by the mutiny of Batavian rowers, resulted in the capture of virtually the entire fleet of twenty-four ships. The Batavians now had a navy.

News of their success "spread like wildfire," winning the rebels allies among a number of German and Gallic tribes. With these reinforcements, in the fall of the year 69, Civilis launched an all-out attack on the fort of Vetera,

near Xanten, on the Rhine southeast of Nijmegen. It was a big fort whose normal complement was about 10,000 men. Now, with Vitellius's recall of troops to Rome, it was manned by half that number. Civilis's initial assault, which began with separate national contingents showing "what each could do on its own," was repulsed. Aware that the defenders had only a few days' provisions, Civilis thought it prudent to let famine do what force had failed to accomplish.

While Civilis sought to unite Germans and Gauls against the Romans, the Roman forces were riven by suspicion and mistrust. Within the army of the Rhine, for example, senior officers tended to favor Vespasian, while the rank and file supported Vitellius—and suspected their superiors of collaborating with the enemy. Among those they most distrusted was the man Vitellius had entrusted with the task of defending the Rhine frontier, Hordeonius Flaccus. He was elderly, ill, and unpopular, and was thought to be sympathetic to Vespasian. Thus, when Flaccus ordered the commander of the 22nd Legion, Dillius Vocula, to move out to relieve the siege at Vetera, the soldiers balked on the march north along the



In a somber painting by Rembrandt, Civilis (crowned) and other Batavian noblemen swear an oath of allegiance before rising up against the Romans.

Rhine and forced Flaccus—reclining on pillows aboard a naval launch—to turn over the command to Vocula. Later, after being surprised and nearly overrun by the Batavians at an encampment south of Vetera and forced to retreat up the Rhine, the troops ran amok: as their officers looked on, soldiers dragged Flaccus out of bed and killed him. They would have killed Vocula, too, if he hadn't escaped from camp by disguising himself as a slave.

Meanwhile, at Vetera, the siege continued—and the desperate defenders came up with a new engine of war. It was a kind of jointed claw that could be let down suddenly to scoop up one or more soldiers, who, Tacitus explains, would be “whisked up into the air before the eyes of their fellows” and dumped inside the camp. While the device may have improved Roman morale, the defenders were starving.

In November, word reached the Lower Rhine that the forces of Vitellius had suffered a crushing defeat at the battle of Cremona. Now, many commanders and provincial governors

began ordering their troops to swear allegiance to Vespasian, who, in fact, would not become emperor for another six weeks.

A cohort commander was sent to inform Civilis that, if he had truly set out to help Vespasian, he should now cease hostilities. But the commander, a man of ambiguous loyalties, was easily persuaded by Civilis's counterargument—namely, that the Batavians and their allies, though “only a tiny fragment of the Gallic provinces,” had destroyed the Romans' major bases “or are now cracking them in the grip of war and hunger.” This was no time to stop



fighting. With these words, Civilis dismissed the commander.

Civilis next met with a group of influential conspirators in the very heart of the Roman Rhine—Cologne, a rich city now allied with the Batavians. Among the most prominent were a high-ranking Treviran officer named Julius Tutor—the Treviri, who lived around Trier, had long been faithful Roman allies—and Julius Sabinus, a Lingon, or Celtic Gaul, with “bogus pretensions to high birth.” (He claimed, among other things, that his grandmother had been Caesar’s mistress during the Gallic War.) Both men served

under Vocola, whose legions had quickly repented of their murderous mutiny.

All signs pointed to the success of the rebellion, the Cologne conspirators agreed. Even though Vitellius was dead, beaten to death by a Roman mob as Vespasian’s army surged into the capital, many legions were refusing or reluctant to acknowledge Vespasian as emperor. Garrisons in virtually every province were fighting one enemy or another, Roman or foreign.

Moreover, the burning of the Capitol in Rome—the very symbol of the city’s imperial destiny—by troops loyal to Vitellius was surely a sign of the passing of dominion from Rome to the nations north of the Alps.

A strategy for phase two of the war was drawn up by Civilis and his fellow conspirators in Cologne. All passes over the Alps were to be closed to the legions from the south. The Gallic provinces were to be incited to rise up against their oppressors and found an independent Gallic Empire. As for the Vitellian garrison holding out at Vetera, these men should be encouraged to join the alliance, further strengthening the rebels’ armed forces.

Soon after this meeting, Vocola again set out to relieve the beleaguered camp—and again was forced to retreat. He had almost reached Vetera when his Treviri and Lingon troops defected, shortly after which he was murdered at the behest of one of his Treviran cavalry officers. Vocola’s troops—members of the 1st, 4th, and 22nd Legions, who had been compelled to swear allegiance to Vespasian—were among the first to be persuaded to swear allegiance to the Gallic Empire.

At about the same time, Tutor’s forces compelled the troops in Upper Germany—roughly from south of Bonn to

Basel—to take the same oath of loyalty.

Then, finally, the half-strength legions at Vetera—the 5th and the 15th—reduced to eating roots and grass, surrendered. The legionaries’ lives were spared, on condition that they, too, swear allegiance to the new empire. In fact, however, many who took the oath were killed by Germans, who plundered and burned the camp. “It is true,” the scrupulous historian

notes, “that Civilis . . . loudly blamed the Germans for what he described as a criminal breach of faith. But our sources do not make it clear whether this was mere hypocrisy or whether Civilis was really incapable of restraining his ferocious allies.”

Interestingly, for reasons Tacitus can only guess at, Civilis himself did not take the oath, nor would he allow any Batavian to do so. The rebel whom the Roman condescendingly describes as “unusually intelligent for a native” seems always to have left doors open, in the interests

of further advancement or escape.

All the way up the Rhine now, from Xanten to the Alps, the winter quarters of the cohorts and cavalry regiments and legions were destroyed. The fort at Mainz was one of the very few left intact.

These successes marked the high point of the rebellion. The plan of action drawn up in Cologne might have led to further successes, but Tutor failed to close the Alpine passes, nor was the Upper Rhine adequately manned to block the advance of legions. The Gauls, assembled for a conference in Reims, chose to ignore the call to rise up against the Romans, even as Vespasian’s legions began their long march from various ends of the empire to end the revolt—five legions setting out over the Swiss passes, two setting

**No one knows
what became of
the Batavians,
but fifteen
centuries later,
the Dutch,
struggling for
their own free-
dom from Spain,
would adopt as
ancestors this
race that took
on Rome.**

Tacitus: Selective Readings

During the Renaissance, the Dutch and their near neighbors the Germans turned to Tacitus to discover what today would be called their roots. The Dutch relied on *The Histories*, written around the year A.D. 100, when many eyewitnesses to the revolt of the Batavians were still alive; the Germans, on the *Germania*, completed in the year A.D. 98.

The Dutch found Tacitus's account of the Batavian uprising against the Romans helpful as an aid in forging a national identity during the seventeenth century, as they waged their eighty-year war of independence against Spain. Or, rather, they found their version, their reading, of that account useful.

Where Tacitus saw wily and unprincipled villains, patriotic Dutch scholars saw bold freedom fighters, heroes in the mold of Hercules, graphically represented in the carved wooden figures that adorned the poop deck of the great galleon *Batavia*, built in the 1620s for trade with (where else?) Batavia, the name given by the Dutch East India Company to the site in Java chosen as the company's headquarters.

A nice example of how Tacitus could be stood on his head can be found in the preface to P.C. Hooft's translation of Tacitus's complete works, published in Amsterdam in 1668. The tome merits the reader's attention "because the subject matter not only occa-

sionally touches on the Batavians, our forefathers, but above all because it frequently gives rise to sentiments that are strikingly similar to those of the Batavians: because [Tacitus's] chief objective seems to be to instill in his reader a loathing for slavery and a love of freedom."

The writer of the preface was the mayor of Amsterdam, Geeraardt Bors van Walveren, who also happened to be the director of the Dutch East India Company. It is curious to think that the Dutch subjugation of what became Indonesia—a process that started with the construction in 1619 of the company's fort in what came to be called Batavia—got under way when the Dutch themselves were fighting to rid themselves of an oppressive foreign rule.

The Germans, meanwhile, had scant reason to dwell on *The Histories*, in which the Germans (when Tacitus bothers to distinguish them from the Batavians) attack with "reckless folly" and "incoherent fury" and lose battles by getting caught up in looting before the fighting is over.

The *Germania* provided a more positive picture of the Germans, whose virtues Tacitus used as a kind of foil or counter-example with which to admonish his Roman readers. "They live uncorrupted by the temptations of public shows or the excitements of banquets." "They are almost unique among barbarians in being

content with one wife." "Good morality is more effective in Germany than good laws are elsewhere."

Of overriding importance to the National Socialist leaders and theorists of this century was Tacitus's endorsement of the opinion that "the peoples of Germany have never contaminated themselves by intermarriage with foreigners but remain of pure blood, distinct and unlike any other nation."

As a result of such passages, the *Germania*—first published in German in 1496—was revered by Nazi racial theorists. The historian Simon Schama devotes a fascinating chapter of his *Landscape and Memory* to "The Hunt for Germania." There he recounts the tug-of-war between Mussolini, in whose country a prized manuscript of the work, anciently housed in a German monastery, had come to rest, and Hitler, who wanted it back in Germany—preferably in time for the 1936 Berlin Olympics. So long as Mussolini remained in power, however, the Nazis had to be content with a photographic facsimile, which served as the basis for an edition to which SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler wrote the foreword.

After Mussolini was driven from power in July 1943, Himmler dispatched a special team to Italy to recover the manuscript—"the birth certificate of the German race," in Schama's apt phrase. The manuscript was

known, or thought, to be in a palazzo in the hills above Ancona on the Adriatic coast—the Palazzo Osimo, from which the manuscript took its name, the *Codex Aesinas*.

Assisted by the local Fascist militiamen, the German officers proceeded to take the entire palazzo apart. "And as room after room declared itself barren," Schama writes, "what began as a systematic search turned into a violent festival of vindictive malice. Frescoes were scraped to the bare plaster . . . ; paintings slashed; furniture ripped apart; mosaic floors smashed to shivers and ground into colored powder with the butt end of machine guns."

The search was thorough but misaddressed. The SS men had ransacked the wrong palazzo. The anti-Fascist Count Balleani, who had long since moved to New York, owned three palazzi in the hills above Ancona. The SS men had conducted a perfunctory search of the seemingly empty but most accessible of the three, but they had failed to explore a kitchen cellar, in which lay a tin-lined trunk that contained the manuscript that begins, "*De origine et situ Germanorum*."

As Schama observes, "The fruitless quest by the cultural storm troops of the Third Reich . . . must represent one of the most tenacious examples of the obsession with a myth of origins." —J.S.



Batavian women weep as their husbands go off to assault the great Roman fort of Vetera, near Xanten on the Rhine. Civilis's rebel forces suffered a major defeat there when a turncoat led the Romans in a surprise attack from the rear.

out from Spain, and another summoned from Britain. The fortunes of war were about to turn.

At this point, it may be useful to step back from the fighting, which took place on ever-shifting fronts—on land, in rivers, at sea—and featured a changing cast of Roman commanders, and look at some of the more remarkable aspects of this ancient war.

The part played by women, for example. All the Germanic tribes seem to have held women in reverence and, in war, to have kept them close at hand, behind a barrier of wagons, their battle shouts and shrill ululations serving to remind their men of what they were fighting for, of the fate that would befall their wives and children if they lost. So, too, Civilis, though apparently

more Celtic than Germanic, on the first day of the assault on Vetera brought along his mother and sisters and ordered the wives and children of all his men to stand together in the rear “as a spur to victory or a reproach to the routed.”

And then there was Velea, the prophetess who lived in a high tower on the banks of the Lippe, a tributary that enters the Rhine a few miles upriver from Xanten. Velea had foretold that the rebels would achieve notable victories and exterminate the legions. Civilis often consulted with her, and trophies of victory, including important prisoners of war and captured ships, were sent to her as tribute.

As it happened, a woman—a “native,” a Ubian—played a significant part in the capture of a whole flotilla of Roman ships. Petilius Cerialis, the commander

of the flotilla, moving upriver from Bonn to Mainz, chose to spend the night—“a dark and cloudy night”—at an undisclosed location with his Ubian lover, telling his guards he did not want to be disturbed. In his absence, discipline was disastrously relaxed, and the Batavians took the opportunity to launch a surprise attack. The following morning, Velea beheld a new gift from the Batavians: the squadron's flagship, aboard which the amorous commander usually slept, had been towed up the Lippe and was tied up below her tower.

Another striking aspect of this war is the way the Batavians used water—in which they were at home—against the Romans. Near the end of the war, Civilis, having reinforced his army, took up position near Xanten, while Cerialis, having also received reinforcements, marched against him at the

Civilis and the Roman commander Cerialis talk peace across a severed bridge in another painting by Van Veen. The Batavians were accepted back into the Roman fold without harsh penalty—though Batavian soldiers would never again be permitted to serve in their own homeland.

head of six legions. The terrain separating the Batavian encampment and the approaching legions was naturally swampy. Civilis ordered a dam or mole to be built at an angle to the Rhine, which pushed the current out to create "a slippery, treacherous waste of inundated land." When the Roman cavalry tried to cross it, their mounts sank into the muck, causing widespread panic. The Batavians and their allies, on the other hand, knowing where the shallows were, were able to gallop through them and attack the Roman flanks and rear. "It resembled," Tacitus writes, "nothing so much as a naval engagement, as the men floundered about everywhere in the flood waters or grappled hand and foot on any patch of firm ground where they could stand."

The Romans, however, won the battle, thanks to a turncoat Batavian who mapped out a firm-ground route to the Batavian rear. It was a victory that, Tacitus writes, "would have marked the end of the war if . . ." If the Roman fleet had followed up. If the cavalry had pressed the fleeing rebels. If it hadn't started to rain hard. If night had not fallen.

Shortly after, pushed back onto his island stronghold, Civilis again resorted to turning the Rhine against his enemies, this time by dismantling a breakwater built by Drusus half a century before to divert the Waal into the Rhine to assure that it would be navigable. The result, Tacitus explains, was that "the Rhine . . . poured down in spate" to rejoin the Waal. This time, it was the Romans' turn to run.

The opening up of dikes and flooding of land was to be used by the Dutch, with dramatic effect, in their war of independence more than fifteen centuries later. Spanish troops invested the city of Leiden in May 1574. The population was starving when, in August of that





year, William of Orange ordered the opening of dikes to flood the Spanish besiegers. But, as the historian Simon Schama observes in *The Embarrassment of Riches* (1987), "to help Leiden, the water had to be deep enough to paralyze all Spanish troop movement and permit a rebel flotilla to sail almost to the city walls as a relieving force." This required the opening of several more dikes. Finally, in mid-September, an equinoctial storm made it possible for the fleet to sail up and relieve the city. (During World War II, the Dutch opened dikes to deter the German invasion in 1940, and the Germans flooded much of the Netherlands to deter the Allied advance in the spring of 1945.)

The weather—in fact, an equinoctial storm—seems to have played a significant role in bringing the Batavians' year-long revolt to an end. The Rhine was flooding. Roman camps on the flat ground were being washed away. The Roman fleet was nowhere in sight. Cerialis extended peace feelers to Civilis, while at the same time trying to persuade the prophetess Velede in her high tower to side with the Romans—a strange turn of events, seeing that if Cerialis had been aboard his flagship on the dark and cloudy night when he lost his fleet to the Batavians, the amorous commander would have been part of the gift package presented to the prophetess.

Civilis had little choice but to accept Cerialis's peace offer. His people wanted peace. A war purportedly waged on behalf of Vespasian—or had it been in the cause of freedom?—had brought them nothing but hardship. Vespasian was emperor; the civil wars were over. Aware that his people had turned against him, Civilis requested a conference. "A bridge over the river Nabalia" —either the Vecht or the IJssel—"was cut," Tacitus writes, "the two commanders advanced to the edges of the gap, and Civilis began his speech in these terms . . ."

And a few lines into his speech, the manuscript as it has come down to us breaks off.

What happened next? The Romans appear to have been quite unusually willing to forgive and forget—to a degree.

While the "ancient alliance" was restored, the wary Romans established a new legion post on the bluffs at Nijmegen in the year 71 to prevent further unrest in the region. The Romans also no longer allowed Batavian troops to serve in their homeland and along the Rhine; the camps along the Lower Rhine were manned chiefly by troops drawn from Spain and the Balkans, while Batavian auxiliaries were sent to foreign postings, the Balkans, among other places, where a gravestone has been recovered that begins with the boast:

I am the man who . . . brave and the foremost among 1,000 Batavians, under the eyes of Hadrian, swam the broad waters of the Danube in full battle gear. After which I shot an arrow into the sky and, while it was still aloft, split it with a second arrow . . .

They also served with distinction in Britain. In the battle to take the island of Anglesey off the coast of Wales in the year 77, the mere sight of a massed force of Batavians swimming to shore in full battle gear was enough to make the defenders surrender without a fight.

What happened to Civilis is unclear, though it's hard to believe that this unusually intelligent native did not survive, with his head on his shoulders and no chains on his ankles.

And then, more than a millennium and a half later, he was reborn as a national hero. Among those who assisted in this revival was Grotius, who in 1610 published a scholarly tome in which he argued that the Dutch had been independent ever since the Romans recognized the Batavian nation as an equal and independent entity.

As it happened, the year before the publication of Grotius's work, Spain had signed a truce with the rebellious Dutch, which, as the Dutch saw it, signaled recognition of the provinces' independence in fact, if not on parchment. Ancient history, thus, came to seem timely.

The signing of the truce—which inaugurated a twelve-year intermission in a very bloody war—prompted an ef-

fort to document and exalt the country's ancient independence by commissioning works of art. Thus, in 1609, the States General in The Hague decided to decorate the gallery of its assembly hall with a series of twelve paintings depicting *The Revolt of the Batavians Against the Romans*. The series, by Otto van Veen, or Vaenius, begins with the beheading of Civilis's brother and ends with peace talks at the severed bridge.

In 1655, by which time Spain had officially recognized the independence of the rebellious northern provinces, Amsterdam's city fathers commissioned a series—again twelve paintings, but a lot bigger than the ones in The Hague—on the same subject, to decorate the gallery of the new city hall.

The most interesting of this later series is Rembrandt's depiction of the passage in Tacitus's *Histories* in which he describes the feast held at night in a sacred grove, after which Civilis's guests, having agreed to join in the conspiracy, swore an oath of allegiance "marked by barbarous ritual."

None of the artists, of course, had a clue what Civilis looked like. Or, rather, they had one clue—Tacitus's statement that Civilis had only one eye. They all had to guess what clothing he wore, with some artists choosing to make him look totally Roman, while others dressed him up in medieval or Italian Renaissance garb. Rembrandt dimmed the lighting and clothed the Batavian in robes similar to those he picked out of his costume wardrobe for his self-portrait of 1658. While others insisted on making the man look heroic, Rembrandt's Civilis is a brooding, powerful, grimly determined man: a Macbeth without an ambitious wife goading him to murder.

The Amsterdam city fathers, apparently displeased with this representation of the newfound father of their country, returned the picture to the painter. They wanted a hero, not a survivor.

JON SWAN, a freelance writer based in Southfield, Massachusetts, is a frequent contributor to MHQ.

A NOTE TO OUR READERS

Just as we're turning out the following year's issues, we've also begun work on the 1997-1998 issue. It's a big job, but we're confident we'll be able to bring you the best of the year's military history. We'll be sure to include the most interesting and important events of the year, as well as the most interesting and important people. We'll be sure to include the most interesting and important events of the year, as well as the most interesting and important people.

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