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### Finding Caesar in Spain

ALISTAIR FORREST *merges fact and fiction in Hispania Ulterior.*

As a young journalist I used to laugh with colleagues who joked: "Never let the facts get in the way of a good story." Alas, I have known some for whom this was a serious mantra, but none of them are likely to grace the ranks of writers of historical fiction.

You can't argue with facts, you can only weave your story around them. But first you have to dig them up like the gems they are, and that is a daunting prospect unless you are a 100-year-old historian whose life has been devoted to study. And debut novelists like me need a large dose of luck to go with the hard graft.

My good fortune came about when I moved to Spain in 2005 with a burning passion to write historical fiction, an enthusiasm that dulled each evening under the weight of a very demanding day job as editor of four magazines. The house my wife and I chose stands amid well-tended olive groves in an upland valley opposite Monda, a charming village in the Sierra de las Nieves Natural Park not far inland from Marbella. I knew that here I could find the freedom of thought to write a novel based on a character whose intelligence and engineering skills could influence the outcome of ancient warfare against the odds. It was a fairly loose idea that needed a home in those elusive historical facts.

My wife and I have inquisitive minds, but we quickly realised how little we knew about the history, customs and culture of our new region. As we enjoyed a glass of Rioja on the terrace, we looked across the valley to the whitewashed houses of Monda and its imposing castle, surrounded by breath-taking views of the mountains. We logged on and began to find out more – and discovered that none other than Julius Caesar had led eight crack legions right through the valley to Monda (then called Munda) to finally defeat the sons of Pompey. He probably stood in our garden, long before it was populated with palms, olives, and almonds.

Not long after this epiphany, I read the final book in Conn Iggulden's Emperor series, *The Gods of War*, hoping to learn something from his account of the Battle of Munda. It wasn't there. The author explained in his historical note: "For reasons of plot and length, I have omitted battles in Spain and Africa as Julius and his generals crushed legions loyal to Pompey." I am glad he did this because one of the greatest modern fiction writers dealing with this period had left me with a blank canvas. I could find nothing in recent fiction that would influence me beyond my own imaginations and the "feel" of the location where it all happened.

There was a small problem though. Many historians believe that the Battle of Munda took place near Osuna, which lies some fifty miles to the northwest. But facts need corroborating, and the community of our Monda is adamant that it was here that Caesar's *Populares* finally defeated the Pompeian *Optimates*. As the Spanish don't deal in facts so much as raised voices, I took that as proof enough – if there is a difference of opinion, then I have the choice to opt for one or the other. Or put another way, never let a disputed fact get in the way of a good story!



Monda today - the Pompeian legions were probably arrayed where the nearest buildings are situated and to the right in front of the hill where the Moorish castle now stands

And so to research. This took two forms, walking and reading. There is a small section of Roman road leading toward Monda – enough of an historical site to halt the progress of a new road – and in the town there are ancient springs that never dry up and would have made this a logical ancient settlement. The town would also have been easily defended in a siege with ample water and a steep incline to where early palisades and Roman walls could have been. A Moorish castle now stands on a steep hill above the town, and although local folklore says there was a fort there in ancient times, this cannot be proved. The remnants of the *Optimates* army took refuge behind the walls of Monda and were under siege for several weeks.

The lie of the land matches an eyewitness account. Caesar's own "official" history of the campaign<sup>1</sup> states: "The two camps were divided from one another by a plain about five miles in extent, so that Pompey, in consequence of the town's elevated position, and the nature of the country, enjoyed a double defence. Across this valley ran a rivulet, which rendered the approach to the mountain extremely difficult, because it formed a deep morass on the right." Stretching northeast from the town of Monda, toward modern day Coín (Lacibus in Roman times), is what could be termed a broad upland valley where family-owned olive groves clothe a series of low hillocks. In front of Monda there is a brook, dry in summer, with a marshy area to the right as you look from this valley. In 45 BCE there would have been no olive trees as these have been planted in ordered rows over the past century or so – it would have resembled a plain amid the mountains – and on the town side of the brook is a steep incline, the ideal ground for Gnaeus Pompey to stand his ground and hope to draw Caesar on.

While the location threw up some difficulties, the battle itself did not. Though his work has been questioned by some historians, I trusted the account of Appian of Alexandria<sup>2</sup> (c.95-c.165) who has a passage in which Caesar is goaded by Gnaeus Pompey. The young

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general accused Caesar of cowardice, prompting a degree of rage that ultimately led Caesar to personally thrust his way to the front line at Munda and exhort his troops to victory. Caesar was unusually brutal in his last battle. He believed he was right, his patience had run out, and he had been called a coward.

Other early accounts of the battle can be found in Appian and Cassius Dio's Roman History,<sup>3</sup> which no doubt rely on Caesar's work as their primary source. Together with Caesar's former legate Titus Labienus, who had defected to the Optimates cause probably because he had been overlooked for promotion, the Pompey brothers arrayed their forces on the rising land before Munda, using the brook as a natural obstacle. Caesar's eight legions were outnumbered by the thirteen of the Optimates, but the latter contained a large number of raw local recruits. There was a long stand-off as Caesar waited in vain for the larger army to advance onto flat ground, but eventually he lost patience and sounded the advance. The fighting was savage and bloody, with Caesar himself advancing to the front line to exhort his men to courage and ferocity.

Cassius Dio's account of the battle includes this: "All would have perished or at nightfall they would have parted with honours even, had not Bogud, who was somewhere outside the conflict, set out for Pompey's camp, whereupon Labienus, observing this, left his station and proceeded against him. Pompey's men, then, supposing him to be in flight, lost heart." In the slaughter that followed, Caesar lists thirty thousand Pompeians dead and a meagre one thousand of his own men. Needless to say I have left these figures out of *Libertas* – who was counting?

Having researched the Battle of Munda, its causes and its effect on the politics of Rome, it was time to weave the story around the facts. Before the Romans came, the community was probably based on the simple things in life like hunting, animal husbandry, arable crops, baking bread, and brewing. A lifestyle that remained unchanged in inland Andalucia until EC money built new roads for other Europeans to venture away from the Costas! That is the point – this happened in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE when the Celtiberian and Phoenician population came under the influence of the Romans, and towns like Munda became important satellite settlements in support of larger cities like Corduba (Cordoba) and Gades (Cadiz), often at the intersection of existing trade routes.

Rather than assume a collection of Pythonesque yokels whipping up rebellion and asking "What have the Romans done for us?", I chose instead to develop the theme of an indigenous people who were creative and inventive in their own right. They understood herbcraft and lacked nothing for a full, healthy life. The hero in *Libertas* is not a warrior but a thinker. He is appalled at the horror that Rome brings to his hometown, but he warms to the younger of the Pompey brothers, Sextus.

In my research, I found myself liking the younger Pompey. Following the disaster of Munda, he went on to become a successful pirate,

which indicates a certain degree of filial angst since his father, Pompey the Great, had dealt with the earlier pirate threat so convincingly in 67 BCE. My liking for the young Sextus had nothing to do with the Pirates of the Caribbean phenomenon our children raved about, although I have to confess his character is in places somewhat Depp-like. Sextus became a successful pirate in the sense that he attracted many escaped slaves and created a strong personal navy that defeated the fleets of Augustus twice before Agrippa's success against him at Naulochus in 36 BCE. For me, his sense of fun and adventure would make the perfect foil for the more thoughtful hero, Melqart. And this is where I have taken a risk with the facts – the invention of embryonic Morse code, the retractable keel, and the torpedo (please stay with me!).

Pushing boundaries like this could be regarded as dangerous for a non-scientist whose history qualifications amount to an A-level in the subject and a pile of well-thumbed paperbacks by Bernard Cornwell, Conn Iggalden, and Simon Scarrow. Actually there are many more than these three, and I'm not light on research thanks to the internet and my wife's library. But torpedos? Be gentle, scientist critics!

My love affair with the technology of ancient warfare began with a slight exasperation at the ubiquitous shield wall as a grunt-and-shove solution to hostilities. Sure, the Romans used numerous contraptions as early attempts at weapons of mass destruction but, apart from Greek fire and Hannibal's elephants, there seemed to be little innovation to enliven the pages of pre-gunpowder historical fiction.

I began by asking my scientist brother for ideas. He has a track record of madcap inventions that have made money for someone else, but his head was in the microchip as the solution for everything and I don't think he even heard the question. And I flunked physics at school. Spinning logs on level ground with tensioned ropes, as a method of negating cavalry charges or breaking closed ranks of foot soldiers, was my starting point. Later this somewhat disastrous idea was adapted as a method of catching a wild boar in *Libertas* – but now I had the germ of an idea about spin and thrust.

The inevitable diaspora after the battle takes Sextus to Sicily where he begins to build his pirate nation, and Melqart across the seas in search of his enslaved family. By chance he is shipwrecked in Sicily on his way to Rome, where he helps Sextus by developing the Sea Spear. I have the original drawings – my own – in which I allowed only known Roman contraptions such as ballistae, and ropes. As my unconvincing science failed



Part of an ancient track, originally Roman, leading up to Monda

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me, so did Melqart's Sea Spear. But we both persevered until at last the thick wooden spears were launched spinning to put two Roman galleys out of action.

Morse code? Sunshine hours are abundant in Andalucia, allowing a system of flashed signals from mountain peak to mountain peak, with apologies to Samuel Morse!<sup>4</sup> The retractable keel? My research showed that some small Mediterranean fishing boats contained a waterproofed box built to the level of the gunwale, into which seawater could fill via holes in the hull of the boat. This was used to keep fish alive and fresh until landed. Melqart develops this container to allow him to lower and lift a shaped wooden 'wing' (keel) and sail closer to the wind. Of course, he loses the race despite his invention because he capsizes. Such is life!

I know the pitfalls – they're called eagle-eyed historians and knowledgeable enthusiasts. If accountants, plumbers, and lawyers dress up as Romans on weekends and re-enact famous Roman battles, and read every Scarrow, Iggulden, and Saylor novel ten minutes after the presses run, what chance has a fanciful first-timer like me? I know they'll be after me. For example, I had four references to tomatoes in the proof copy because the locals eat mountains of tomatoes with their pork and sea bass in these parts. Thank God I read an HNS review of an earlier tomato victim's book before the final copies went to the shops!

Yes, sound research is a prerequisite, and lots of it, but we never stop learning. Or as Harry S. Truman put it: "It's what you learn after you know it all that counts."

But I still have the novelist's get-out clause. We make stuff up and apologise later, usually to our partner or the bank manager. So to those who insist the Battle of Munda took place at Osuna rather than modern day Monda, I say this: You're wrong. I found an old Polaroid of Julius Caesar dressed in full battle regalia when I was digging in my garden.

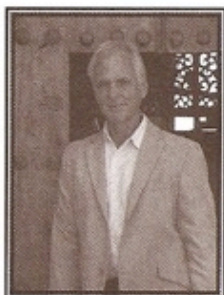
### Notes

1. Julius Caesar's *The Spanish War* – while this work has been attributed to Caesar, it was probably written by an officer who was involved in the campaign. Available online at <http://www.online-literature.com/caesar/spanishwar> (translators: W. A. McDevitte and W. S. Bohn).

2. *Histories of Appian*, English translation by Horace White, first published in 1913 as part of the Loeb Classical Library, available online at <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Appian/>.

3. Cassius Dio's *Roman History* (Loeb Classical Library) is also available at <http://penelope.uchicago.edu>.

4. Samuel F. B. Morse (1791-1872) developed "lightning wires" and "Morse code", an electronic alphabet that could carry messages.



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