Philology on Tacitus's Graupian Hill and Trucculan Harbour

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ABSTRACT

'Mons Graupius' is not linked with Welsh 'crwb' ('hump'), which is a loan from English, but may relate to Welsh 'crib' ('ridge'). The history of the forms eliminates identification of Mons Graupius with Duncrub, Perthshire, and indicates one with Bennachie, Aberdeenshire. 'Trucculan Harbour' may relate to Middle Welsh 'trwch' ('broken; fracture; cleft, slot, fissure'), perhaps strengthening the case for identification with Loch Harport, Skye.

MONS GRAUPIUS

No problem has preoccupied Scottish antiquaries more than the site of Tacitus's Mons Graupius and the meaning of its name. Passionately pursued, the issue was gently satirized in Scott's *Antiquary*, where Jonathan Oldbuck is determined to establish 'the local situation of the final conflict between Agricola and the Caledonians' (Birley 1999, xxxix). Nevertheless, the form *Graupius* still repays study, and apparently offers new evidence for the battle's location.

Fundamental here are the views of Watson (1926). Tacitus describes the leader of the Celtic tribes as *Galgacus*. Watson, rightly taking this as a corruption of *Calgacus* 'swordsman' (cf Middle Irish *colg* 'sword'), conjectured that *Graupius* was a corruption of *Craupius*. This he compared with Modern Welsh *crwb*, 'hump, haunch', which he derived from Old Welsh **crup*, from British **craupius*. He noted on this basis that *Mons Graupius* was formally identical with *Dorsum Crup*, mentioned in the Pictish Chronicle, and supposed by Skene to be Duncrub (NO 0014), 13km WSW of Perth. However, Watson pointed out

that, since the battlefield is usually placed north of the Tay, there may have been more than one 'hill of the hump' (Watson 1926, 56).

In their review of the question, Rivet and Smith cited Jackson's view of 1955 that *Graupius* might not be Celtic at all, though if it were it would be Brittonic. But they added that in 1970 he accepted *Crub* as possibly from **Craupius*, with speakers of Gaelic having perhaps substituted *u* for Pictish *ü* (which had no equivalent in Gaelic). They noted that this does not necessarily imply that Mons Graupius was fought at Duncrub (Rivet & Smith 1979, 370–1), since equivalence of name is one thing, evidence for a battlefield is another. However, despite his revisionism of 1970, in still later corrigenda to his 1955 paper Jackson added nothing to his earlier remarks. By then he clearly thought his original view needed no updating (Jackson 1980).

The most recent comment here is by Birley. He observes that some relate the name to Welsh *crwb* 'hump', others regard it as pre-Celtic, and Rivet and Smith leave the matter open. He also refers to seven possible sites proposed by scholars for the battle (from

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Perthshire to Caithness) and supplies a useful map of them (Birley 1999, lvi, 85).

Let us have another look at the philology here, beginning with Welsh *crwb*. Here we find a surprise. In a fascicule published in the 1950s, the *OED*'s Welsh equivalent (a) shows that the word is unattested before 1783, and (b) derives it from English *crub* (a dialectal version of *curb*), which *OED* records from 1565. Even the related Welsh *crwbach* 'hunchback' and *crwban* 'tortoise', with diminutive suffixes, are known only from the 14th century (Thomas 1950–, 614). This must eliminate any link between *crwb* and *Graupius*. If the Welsh forms derive from Middle English *crub/curb*, itself from Old French *courbe* 'bent, curved', they cannot be ancient. Had Watson known that in the 1920s, he would not have used *crwb* to explain the name in Tacitus. We can go further. If there is no link between *Graupius* and *crwb*, there can be none between *Graupius* and *Dorsum Crup*. Watson's reconstructed Old Welsh **crup* and British **craupius* would be ghosts; they could not be used to explain *Dorsum Crup*. There is, then, no philological evidence to associate Mons Graupius with Duncrub, Perthshire.

If *Graupius* cannot be related to *crwb*, where does this leave us? Most philologists would now regard the Pictish toponym as pre-Celtic and thus of irrecoverable meaning, since attempts to relate it to words in Greek, Germanic, Lithuanian, and Slavonic are unconvincing. Yet there is another possibility. It has not been sufficiently stressed that all manuscripts of *Agricola* go back to a unique original (now lost), written in Germany soon before 850, and made public in 1455. *Graupius* is thus a form known from one text only, which was copied nearly eight centuries after Tacitus was alive (Birley 1999, xxxvi). It may thus be more corrupt than has been thought. This raises the possibility of further correction. If so, a bold (but quite possible) emendation of *Graupius* would produce a form which is familiar in the Celtic languages and makes excellent sense.

Let us return to Watson's analysis. He argued that since *Galgacus* must be *Calgagus*, *Graupius* might be *Craupius*. This points to a solution. It suggests a link with Welsh *crib* 'comb; crest (of a bird); top, summit, ridge (of hill)'. Unlike *crwb*, this is well attested. Old Welsh *crip* is a ninth-century gloss on Latin *pectens* 'combing'. A comb (*crib*) plays a prominent role in the 11th-century *Mabinogion* tale of Culhwch and Olwen (where a giant forces Arthur to retrieve one from the head of a monster boar). *Crib* also figures on the map of Wales. The 12th-century Book of Llandaff refers to *crib ir alt* 'ridge of the slope' at Llandogo (SO 5204), near Tintern Abbey; Crib y Ddysgl (SH 6055) 'ridge of the dish' and Grib Goch (SH 6255) 'red ridge' are rockfaces on Snowdon; the derived form *cribin* 'rake' figures at Gribin Fawr 'big rake' (SH 7915) and Y Gribin (SH 8417) 'the rake', respectively a cliff and mountainous ridge east of Cader Idris. The Cornish cognate of *crib* is *cryb*, as at Greeb Point (SW 8733), on the coast near Falmouth; its Middle Breton equivalent is *crib* (Thomas 1950–, 594). In Old Irish we have *crích*, 'furrow, border, limit; territory; end'. All these Celtic forms derive from **krikua* (with semi-vocalic *u* and long *i* and *a*), ultimately cognate with Greek *keiro* 'I cut' and *krino* 'I separate, distinguish' (Vendryes 1987, 234–5).

Therefore, cognates of Welsh *crib* 'comb' are known throughout the Celtic world. They are also used of ridges and summits. Might *Graupius* thus represent their proto-Pictish equivalent? Watson's *Craupius* already provides the consonants of Brittonic **crip-*; on this hypothesis, since Welsh *crib*'s Common Celtic ancestor was feminine, Tacitus would have devised a Latin adjective ('Cripian') to go with masculine *mons*. The main problem is, of course, to explain how an original **Cripius* might be corrupted to *Craupius*. Emendation of *Craupius* to **Cripius* seems drastic. Yet we are dealing not with a Latin expression but a proto-Pictish one, which scribes would find

outlandish and meaningless, and be particularly liable to copy incorrectly. The possibilities of accumulated error between the first century (when Tacitus wrote) and the ninth (when our original was copied) need no underlining. One might even reply that only a conservative critic (in Housman's sense of the word) would reject such an emendation, preferring the *Graupius* of our texts even though nobody has ever extracted sense from it. As to how error might have crept in, the Ravenna Cosmography's 'Cantiventi' (Ravenglass, Cumbria) shows scribal confusion of *a* and *i*; for our proposed **Cripius* we might envisage a later stage **Crapius*, with *u* thereafter intruding to produce **Craupius*, followed by *Graupius*. (This *u* became *m* in the 15th-century printed edition of *Agricola*, giving the 'Grampian' of modern maps, television, and local government.)

A process of corruption **Cripius* > **Crapius* > **Craupius* > *Graupius* is therefore possible. That scribes could do far worse than this is shown by *namproeius* (in a 12th-century Vienna manuscript) for the Gaulish name *Nammeius*, where *m* has become *pro* (Ellis Evans 1967, 369). The proposed restoration *Mons Cripius* thus has the advantage of replacing a form that means nothing with one that makes first-class sense, and of indicating a proto-Pictish cognate for Old Welsh *crip*, Cornish *cryb*, Breton *crib*, Old Irish *crích*, and Scottish Gaelic *crìoch*.

If *Graupius* is a corruption of *Cripius*, what implications has it for the site of Agricola's battle? It provides no comfort for those who locate it at Duncrub in Strathearn. Gaelic *u* here could not represent Pictish *i*. The *Dorsum Crup* where Dubh (d 966), king of Scotia, defeated Cuilein (who later killed him), may or may not refer to Old Irish *crob* (dative *crub*) 'hand, claw', which also has a legal meaning (referring to a woman's property). Yet identification of the site with Mons Graupius is philologically impossible (Anderson 1973, 122, 252; Duncan 1975, 95). The battlefield must be sought elsewhere.

Many places have been favoured for it. These include the shore of the Moray Firth; somewhere west of Muiryfold, near Banff; below the hill-fort of Mither Tap of Bennachie (NJ 6822), following J K St Joseph's identification of a Roman camp at Durno (NJ 6927), Aberdeenshire; even the environs of Wick (Anderson 1973, 122; Duncan 1975, 20; Rivet & Smith 1979, 371; Birley 1999, 85). Yet the case made by others for Bennachie is surely strong. If we are right in emending *Graupius* to *Cripius* (on, it should be emphasized, purely philological grounds), it becomes stronger.

This emerges if we turn to the landscape to discover Bennachie's actual shape. This provides unexpected confirmation of the etymology proposed here. Bennachie is an isolated massif, famed in song and described as 'the supreme symbol of the homeland' for many in Aberdeenshire. It dominates the surrounding plain and is visible from the outskirts of Aberdeen 25km away. It consists of a 6.5km ridge with clearly-distinguished summits: Hermit Seat, Watch Craig, Oxen Craig, and (at 1698 feet) Mither Tap. Its outline of four peaks along an east/west ridge thus resembles a comb for hair or the comb of a cock. A Brittonic name in *Crip*- 'comb; bird's crest' thus suits it admirably, as it suits no other mountain at locations proposed for the battle of Mons Graupius. Since Welsh *crib* derives from a Common Celtic feminine, if our proposed reconstruction is correct, the early Picts would have known Bennachie as **Cripa* 'comb (for hair); cock's crest'.

We may therefore sum up as follows. Tacitus's *Mons Graupius* cannot be explained by Welsh *crwb* 'hump', a late loan from English. Welsh *crib* 'ridge' suggests instead an emendation to *Mons Cripius* 'Cripian Mountain'. Since *crib* also means 'comb; bird's crest' and Bennachie is a ridge with four prominent peaks, this supports the view (put forward on quite separate archaeological grounds) that Mons Graupius was Bennachie. It provides no support for claims of other Scottish locations to be the site of this battle. Visitors to the

Aberdeenshire countryside may thus feel with some confidence that it was on the plains below Bennachie, in September AD 83, that there took place 'the final conflict between Agricola and the Caledonians'.

If there is cogency in present arguments that Tacitus's *Mons Graupius* is a corruption of *Mons Cripius* 'Cripian Mountain' from proto-Pictish **Cripa* 'comb (for hair); cock's crest; mountain ridge', and that this is the old name of Bennachie, it provides two lessons. First, repeated statements on Welsh *crwb* 'hump' show the danger of relying on obsolete Celtic philology, particularly as regards Welsh, the study of which has been revolutionized by *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*. Second, if our conclusions are correct, is the value of Celtic philology in helping solve problems in other disciplines, including even the study of Roman warfare, the editing of Latin texts, or the early history of Scotland.

TRUCCULENSIS PORTUS

In *Agricola* 38, Tacitus describes how the Roman army moved to winter quarters after victory at Mons Graupius, and how the fleet, 'with a favourable wind and great success, reached *Portus Trucculensis* (*Trucculensem portum*, variant *Trutulensem portum*, accusative), whence, having sailed along the nearest side of Britain, it had all returned (*unde proximo Britanniae latere praelecto omnis redierat*)' (Rivet & Smith 1979, 97).

The location of this place is an old problem, debated since at least 1533, when Beatus Rhenanus discussed it. Rivet and Smith summarized recent opinion thus (1979). They thought neither manuscript form was correct as it stood. They therefore noted Ogilvie and Richmond's suggestion, ultimately following Rhenanus and Lipsius, that the correct reading is **Rutup(i)ensem*, Richborough in Kent. But they referred as well to Reed's proposal (following Hübner's of 1881) that Tacitus's port was, rather, the *Ugrulentum* of the Ravenna Cosmography. They also cited Hind's criticism

of both these and his arguments for a third possibility, that Tacitus's form is a corruption of **Tun(n)ocelensis*, the adjectival form of *Itunocelum*, an unidentified fort west of Carlisle. However, Rivet and Smith rejected all these on textual and other grounds. As regards actual meaning, they thought the toponym referred to a river (there being no settlement there), and hence suggested links with Celtic-Latin *tructa* 'trout' (though noting this has no known cognate in the Brittonic languages) or else, with metathesis, Modern Welsh *twrch*, the name of various torrents in Wales which dig or root their way through the landscape. But they admitted these etymologies are not very satisfactory, so that the question 'must be left entirely open' (Reed 1971, 147–8; Hind 1974, 285–8; Rivet & Smith 1979, 478–80).

Three other writers should be mentioned here. In a review, Murgia argues that the 'more ancient reading' in manuscripts of Tacitus is *Trutulensem*. Noting that Rhenanus emended this to *Rutupensem* in 1533 (before Lipsius in 1574), Murgia reads *Rutupiensem*, Richborough, the circumnavigation thus ending at the 'fleet's home base – hardly shocking' (1977, 339). Delz nevertheless retains the reading *Trucculensem*, though noting Murgia's remarks (1983, 30). Most recently, Birley translates the passage as, 'At the same time the fleet, with a favourable wind and reputation behind it, occupied the Trucculensian harbour, from which it had set out to coast along the adjacent shore of Britain, and to which it had now returned intact'. He describes the place as a 'Roman naval station' (its name perhaps garbled in transmission) often taken as Richborough, though Rivet and Smith believed it was a harbour in northern Scotland (Birley 1999, xxvii, 28, 91).

In short, no certainty. This note therefore tries a new approach (based in part on philology) to the location of *Trucculensis Portus*, as also to the meaning of its name. First, its location. An older view is that the fleet rounded the north coast, subdued Orkney,

sighted Shetland or Fair Isle, and sailed 'southward along the west coast to a point already known, such as the Firth of Clyde'. Watson thought the port from which the fleet set out and to which it returned could not be settled, 'but it must have been Montrose or some place either on the Firth of Forth or the Firth of Tay' (1926, 7–8).

Yet Rivet and Smith, following Burn, noted that pluperfect *redierat* implies, not that the fleet returned to a starting-point, but rather to a place they had gone to and come back from previously. They now arrived again from the opposite direction, completing the circumnavigation of Britain. Rivet and Smith commented on *Trucculensis Portus* as one of only four settlements in Britain (with London, Colchester and St Albans) named by Tacitus. They therefore sought it in the extreme northwest of the island, at its remotest limit; and, since they derived the name from a hydronym, thought it might have been Sandwood Loch (NC 2264) 11km south of Cape Wrath, an old sea-loch now cut off from open water by a wide band of dunes (1979, 49).

Their reasoning is logical. But there are grave objections to Sandwood Loch as a candidate. Rivet and Smith seemingly chose it through an odd understanding of *trwch* 'boar' as a Welsh hydronym. Since this is applied to Welsh torrents, it hardly fits Sandwood Loch, which is tranquil. More fundamentally, whatever the age of the dunes at Sandwood Loch, if a bar were forming at its mouth in the first century, it would have made a poor anchorage for a Roman fleet, particularly as the loch is itself of little depth. A far better haven would be Loch Inchard, by Kinlochbervie (NC 2156), 8km south of Sandwood. Kinlochbervie is now the base of a major fishing fleet operating in the Minch. If *Trucculensis Portus* were near Cape Wrath (but there is no proof it was), it is likelier to have been Loch Inchard than shallow, sand-clogged Sandwood Loch. Nevertheless, the case for Loch Inchard is not strong, since no Roman remains seem ever to have been found there.

There is a better case for another location (drawn to the writer's attention by the editor of this journal) on Skye, far from Cape Wrath. In a lecture 'The Circumnavigation of Scotland by Agricola's fleet in the early AD 80s' given in January 2001 to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Euan MacKie (summary in *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 131, 432) speaks of two voyages. One was in 81, up the west of Scotland; the other in autumn 83, up the east coast and round the north. He mentions an early identification of the Trucculan Harbour as Loch Broom, the harbour of Ullapool (NH 1394) in Wester Ross. Yet he rejects this, since excavation of Iron Age brochs (Dun Lagaidh and Dun an Rhiroy) on the south shore of the loch produced not a single Roman find, even though the sites were occupied in the first century AD. He therefore argues as follows. Since war galleys in AD 81 carried many men, but relatively little food and water, they would need to land for supplies. Brochs would show where food and water were to be had. The first place with many coastal brochs that the expedition would meet is in north-west Skye, by the anchorages of Loch Bracadale and Loch Harport. These lochs join by Dun Ardtreck (NG 3335), an Iron Age stronghold on a headland. Excavations there in 1965 produced finds which MacKie reinterprets as evidence for a visit by the Roman navy. He concludes the Trucculan Harbour may thus have been on Loch Harport.

Does this view receive support from philology? It seems it does. Rivet and Smith thought the Trucculan Harbour was named after a river. This is possible. But their link here with *tructa* 'trout' has no basis in the Brittonic languages. As for *twrch* 'boar', Watson remarks, 'In Wales several streams are called Twrch, none with us' (1926, 232). Let us try a better approach. Tacitus's *Trucculensis* can be taken as proto-Pictish and therefore closely resembling British; if so, the laws of Celtic philology would associate its first element with Welsh *trwch*. This obsolete form means 'broken' and 'fracture; cleft, slot, fissure; ditch,

trench'; it corresponds to *trychu* 'cut, hew, lop, amputate; cut down (of enemies)', *trychwr* 'slayer', *trychion* 'corpses, casualties', *amdrwch* 'shattered', and *amdrychu* 'shatter'. These are cognate with Old Breton *truch* glossing Latin *obtusi* 'beaten against, belaboured, blunted', Middle Breton *trouc'ha* 'to break, shear, cut (of grass)', and Modern Breton *trouc'her* 'butcher, slaughterman', as in *trouc'her moc'h* 'pig killer' (Williams 1938, 163).

These violent expressions figure in early Welsh poetry. The seventh-century *Gododdin*, a series of elegies for North British heroes wiped out in an attack on the English at Catterick, tells of the warrior Caradog 'cutting down (*trychyat*) three heroes' whose flesh he left for wolves. Eudaf the tall, clothed in purple, was the oppressor of Gwanannon 'land of broken men (*amdrychyon*)'. Moried was a champion on a dapple-grey steed, with 'the fallen in battle cut down (*trwch*) before his blades' (Williams 1938, 14, 33, 39; Jackson 1969, 129, 142, 147). So *trwch* and its cognates were once familiar in the Celtic speech of North Britain.

Place-names are here also relevant. Near Llanafan Fawr (SN 9655) in southern Powys is the river Trychan, first recorded about 1700. The hydronym, if it has undergone metathesis, may be from a personal name *Tyrchan* or common noun *tyrchan*, both meaning 'little boar'. But if *Trychan* represents exactly the original form, it can be linked with *trwch* 'breach, fissure; ditch' and *trychu* 'to break through'. The place-name element *trychiad* 'little breach' certainly occurs in Flintshire at *Gwaen y Trychiad* near Ysgeifiog (SJ 1571) and in south Gwynedd at *Y Trychiad* (SH 6005), where a stream has cut its way into a low ridge (Thomas 1938, 90). These Welsh place-names may therefore indicate a meaning for Tacitus's 'Trucculan Harbour'.

The West Highlands are a stern and desolate area, battered and broken by time. *Trucculensis Portus* might thus refer to some fracture, cleft, or fissure in the landscape, the name containing a proto-Pictish equivalent to Welsh *trwch* 'breach, fissure' that appears (with suffix *-ul*) in Tacitus's *Trucculensis Portus*, perhaps 'Breach Port, Fissure Port'. This seems to suit the early history of *trwch*, which Pokorny derives from **truk-s-*, cognate with Lithuanian *trúk-stu*, 'tear, break, burst', Modern German *Drauche* 'trap', Old Saxon *thruh* 'fetter', and Old English *thruh* 'conduit; stone coffin', the last referring to items that are cut out (1959, 1074). On the basis of Pokorny's derivation of *trwch* from **truk-s-*, Tacitus's *Truccu-* should thus perhaps be emended to *Truxu-*. *Truccu-* may be due to influence from Latin *truculentus* 'stormy' (as Hind and Mugia suggest). An original *Truxu-* may also explain the variant *Trutulensis*. Emendation here of *-cc-* to *-x-* here has, amongst other advantages, that of being milder than others proposed for *Trucculensis*.

If the Trucculan Harbour took its name from a breach in the landscape, does this suit MacKie's arguments? Apparently so. Loch Harport, the result of glacial action, has precipitous slopes rising to c 140m on its north side. If the proposed link with Welsh *trwch* is valid, the loch might well be seen as occupying a cleft, fissure, or gash in the landscape, though we may note this applies even better to Loch Beag by Bracadale (NG 3538), at the foot of a narrow glen faced by those approaching from the sea, for whom Loch Harport comes into view only later.

If, then, the reasoning above is sound, we might take Tacitus's *Trucculensis Portus* as **Truxulensis Portus*, located at Loch Harport, Skye. The name may mean 'Breach Harbour, Fissure Harbour', perhaps referring to the narrow glen by Bracadale at Loch Harport's mouth. Such an interpretation seems to make archaeological and linguistic sense. It also does little violence to the text of Tacitus as we have it. Of course, we cannot be sure these arguments, based upon evidence set out by Burn, Rivet, Smith, and MacKie, solve a problem that has troubled scholars since 1533. But if they do solve it, or help to solve it, they show

how archaeology and philology may advance knowledge by fruitful collaboration.

Finally, if *Trucculensis Portus* was in the West Highlands, we can perhaps identify it with *Ugrulentum* in the Ravenna Cosmography. *Ugrulentum* occurs there after *Cerma*, *Veromo* (of unknown meaning), and *Matovion* ('bear place'). The last two are unlocated places in Scotland north of the Antonine Wall. But *Cerma* has been taken as Ptolemy's *Caereni* 'sheep-worshippers', placed next to the Cornovii of Caithness and thus presumably in Sutherland. Identification of *Ugrulentum* with *Trucculensis* (the loss of initial letters being paralleled in Ravenna's *Bannio* for *Gobannio*, Abergavenny) thus seemingly accords with a location (on grounds set out above) of *Trucculensis Portus* in north-west Scotland.

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