VIII.

## IN SEARCH OF A BATTLEFIELD: AGRICOLA'S LAST BATTLE.

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Agricola, like a good many later generals, had been involved in long correspondence with his government. Some people seem to have thought that the Forth–Clyde Line was too good a frontier not to use; in any case, two years after reaching it, and after his advanced troops had raided up to the Tay, his main front line still remained on the Isthmus.

The first of those two years was spent in consolidating the ground won. In the second, he led sea-borne expeditions up the west coast, among the isles and sea-lochs, and made plans for an invasion of Ireland. But by the spring of A.D. 83 he had obtained permission to advance into Caledonia, and by September 84 he reported that he had driven an allied army of the northern tribes, with great slaughter, from their hill positions at a place called Mount Craupius, and that his sea-borne troops had landed unopposed in Caithness and the Orkneys.

With Agricola's campaigns, Scotland enters the field of formal European history; and it is not surprising that the attempt to identify Scotland's earliest named battlefield, which is also the northernmost battlefield of the Roman Army, has had for antiquaries an irresistible fascination. The name, indeed, misspelt, figures in large letters on our maps; the main mountain mass of the Central Highlands, known to our forbears as Drum Alban, having been rechristened by Renaissance classical scholarship the Grampian Mountains. This guess is not so wrong as it might have been, since the aim of Roman strategy (we can now see from the distribution of their camps up to the Moray Firth) seems to have been to work round, cut off and encircle that main highland mass. But it does not help much towards locating the battlefield.

The suggestion for a possible site which I shall make is therefore very far from being the first, and it is not even very probable that it will be the last. But we have one great advantage over our predecessors: we have those Roman camp-sites. The camps are quite unmistakable in an air-photograph, with their straight sides, rounded corners and defended gateways. Along the line of an old ditch, where the ground has once been deeply dug up, corn especially grows thicker and shows up in a dark line, conspicuous in an air-photograph, even when nothing whatever is visible at ground-level; and

thus on the line of Agricola's advance, as well as in other parts of Britain, the air-photos, for which we have to thank especially Dr J. K. St Joseph, have added to the number of Roman halting-places known even so lately as ten years ago, when Mr Crawford was giving us his great study of Roman sites north of the Forth.

One of these new discoveries lies round the farm of Auchinhove, two miles NE. of Keith, where the road to Elgin gives off a branch road for Cullen. Auchinhove also makes more probable one a little farther north still—ten miles on to the NW., at Fochabers on Speyside, where traces, partly obscured by trees, have been suspected of being really Roman by Mr Crawford and other good judges.

As the number of known Roman camps increases, too, an interesting fact appears. They form a single chain, extending up the east side of the country, usually something like ten miles apart, rarely much more; so regularly spaced, indeed, that where gaps occur it begins to look as if it were merely because a site has not yet been found. None of them have been formally dated yet; naturally, one does not expect to find much broken crockery, which a specialist could date, at these temporary "marching-camps"; and one must remember that the Emperor Severus, on a large-scale punitive expedition, is also said to have reached the "uttermost parts of Britain" 120 years later. But if they were all his, then where are Agricola's? Agricola claimed that he had completed the conquest of Britain; and the large permanent cantonment at Inchtuthil on the Tay, built to house a whole legion, *is* Agricola's, as has lately been proved by Richmond and St Joseph. If, then, Severus also *did* march up to the Moray Firth (I believe he did), he probably used Agricola's old camp-sites. The Roman Government certainly did keep old military routes and road-books in its files, for re-use when required; copies of some of them, in fact, still exist to-day.

Somewhere along this line, then, it is reasonable to look for Agricola's famous battlefield: a line traced in detail, by Crawford, from Inchtuthil north-eastward first, up to the head of Strathmore, where the Roman road ends; that was as far as consolidation ever got. Then it goes inland of Montrose, crossing the two Esks near two camps, both called locally Battle-dykes, past Kair House (with a newly discovered site) to Raedykes, five miles NW. of Stonehaven. Inland of Aberdeen, bending north-west now, it crosses the Dee by the camp of Normandykes and the Don at Kintore; and so, passing probably one site still undiscovered, it strikes over the bleak uplands to Glenmailen camp by the Wells of Ythan, to Auchinhove, beyond the low-lying Pass of Grange, and to Fochabers on the Spey.

Tacitus' *Life of Agricola* gives no direct information as to the topography of these two campaigns. There are however some remarks, in the imaginary speeches which he assigns to the two commanders on the day of battle, from which some hints can be drawn.

Agricola's last battle was certainly fought a long way north of the Tay and of his base at Inchtuthil. For it was fought in late summer, so late that there was no time for consolidation—for "spreading the war," as Tacitus calls it: spreading the army out over the countryside to build permanent forts and dig in for the winter. It had taken the Roman general all summer to get there; a striking fact, and one which has been too little emphasised. But in spite of the lateness of the season, when Agricola had marched, after the battle, into the territory of the Boresti, it was *not* too late for him to send his fleet, with troops on board, to "show the flag" up the coast as far as the Orkneys, and for it to return to base untroubled by equinoctial gales, of which ancient sailors were justifiably nervous.

The Boresti, from whom Agricola took hostages after the battle, were therefore well to the north, and had a seacoast. The chain of camps, ending at the mouth of the Spey, strongly suggests that that coast was on the Moray Firth; indeed, since Bodotria (named twice in Tacitus) is the ancient name of the Forth, it is tempting (with Watson) to connect the Boresti (or perhaps Voresti—the Roman pronunciation of B, V and W sounds was changing just then) with the name of mediæval Farais, modern Forres. The fact that Agricola marched into their land before giving orders to his fleet rather suggests that he there regained contact with his fleet; just as he would do, if he advanced from the Don to the Spey, inland, by way of Ythan Wells, the Pass of Grange and Auchinhove.

That, then, is the case for seeking Mons Craupius near, but not on, the Moray Firth, and somewhere near the northern end of the line of camp-sites. It is, in any case, no very far-fetched inference that the crowning victory, soon after which Agricola turned back towards his winter quarters, was won somewhere near the farthest north that he reached. That the battle was fought somewhere *near*, if not *on*, the coast is also inferred by Crawford from a phrase in the imaginary speech composed by Tacitus for the Caledonian leader—where he describes the Romans as "gazing apprehensively at the unknown hills and sea." The sea (*i.e.* a new sea, the Moray Firth and northwards) could in fact be seen by reconnoitring parties from hilltops near almost every day's march on Agricola's presumed route.

Another group of clues, which may help towards an identification, appears in those passages where Tacitus' account of the battle (though he gives no topographical description) *implies* something about the terrain.

The battle was fought chiefly on ground where both British chariots and Roman cavalry could operate freely; it was fought, that is to say, in open country—either cultivated land or heath; but there were woods behind the British position, and the British infantry were disposed on hill-slopes steep enough for their rearward ranks and contingents to show, tier above tier, behind their front line; "an imposing and also a daunting spectacle," as Tacitus says, no doubt following Agricola himself. The chariotry, described

by Tacitus as occupying "the plains in the midst," must therefore have been posted between the steep hills held by their infantry.   We cannot take the expression to mean "between the two armies"; for Tacitus makes it clear that the first fighting was between infantry on either side.  The Celtic chariots advance only later, in the British counter-attack.

A recent German scholar, by the way, dismisses all the chariots as a figment of Tacitus' imagination.   For, he argues, chariots could not possibly operate in the Scottish highlands; *therefore* the Caledonians had none; Tacitus *invents* them, on the basis of what he had read about northern barbarians in Cæsar and other classical authors.   If our scholar had paid proper attention to topography and archæology, he would have discovered both that Agricola never *entered* the Highlands, but turned their flank, and that bits for horses, terret-rings, other metal pieces of harness and even chariot wheels are important among the material relics known to us from Scotland in Roman times.   This *faux pas* is a fine example of the way in which scholarship which ignores archæology can so easily make itself ridiculous.

We can also infer from Tacitus' narrative something about the length of the front.

Agricola had in his first line 8000 infantry, flanked by 3000 cavalry, divided between the two wings; and in order to make this line as long as the enemy's, he had to extend it till it became rather thin, and some of his officers advised that he should reinforce it from his second line at once. Agricola, however, refused.   He won the battle by launching the attack initially with six Dutch and Belgian battalions; then extending it to the whole of his front line; drawing the undisciplined enemy's forces—both the chariotry and the infantry on the hills to left and right—into a counter-attack; and then catching them on both flanks with fresh cavalry held back in reserve.   It sounds not unlike one phase of the Battle of Hastings. What concerns us at the moment, however, is the question, How long a front would Agricola's "rather long and thin" front line of 8000 infantry and 3000 cavalry cover?

The answer must be, I think, nearly two miles.   For a thin line, by the standards of an ancient army, we may allow perhaps four infantrymen to a yard, or two horsemen: total, 2000 yards for the infantry plus 1500 for the cavalry.   I think that, allowing for some intervals between units, especially on the cavalry wings, the line may have been longer; one-and-a-half miles I should consider a minimum.

This fact, that 3000 horse and 8000 foot were barely enough to cover the front, is one reason why I no longer feel attracted by Mr Crawford's suggestion of ten years ago, that the battle was fought north-west of Stone-haven, with the Roman camp of Raedykes as Agricola's camp before the battle.   The moorland there is not wide enough, between broken ground on

one side and on the other; and also, the slope is nowhere steep enough to give the effect of the British host rising tier above tier, nor to place the attacking infantry, as Tacitus says it did, at a pronounced disadvantage. But a more serious objection to Raedykes, at least to my mind, is that it is not nearly far enough north.   It does not account for the hints dropped by Tacitus, in the speech which he assigns to Agricola, about difficulties of supply so far forward into hostile country; and above all, it does not account for that fact which I have stressed already, that *though it was too late in the season for full exploitation of the victory on land*, it was *not* too late for the fleet to sail right up to Orkney before the equinoctial gales.

The reason why Mr Crawford suggested the Raedykes position (following a hint given by my predecessor at Glasgow, the late Steuart Miller) is that at Raedykes the hills come close to the coast.   Tacitus says that the Caledonians "had already occupied" their hill position before Agricola reached it.   Therefore, said Steuart Miller, it *must* have been at a place which the Roman army had to pass.

I do not think that this last conclusion necessarily follows.   For first, Agricola wanted nothing so much as a pitched battle, in which the Roman superiority in armament and drill gave his troops the advantage; and secondly, the Caledonians would surely have liked nothing so much as for Agricola to march past them, thus letting them through on to his communications.   Their superior mobility and ability to live off the country would then give *them* the advantage.   To get behind Agricola and cut up his convoys was, I believe, what they had been trying to do all that summer, during those weary months of marching and counter-marching, with the Romans never able to bring them to bay, which Tacitus mentions in his "Speech of Agricola."   The summer's operations up to the eve of the battle, which can hardly have been earlier than mid-August, were so far from making an exciting story that Tacitus prefers to give no account of them whatever.   But he has told us something about the events of the previous summer, the first of Agricola's two seasons beyond the Forth, which shows us at least the kind of course that operations could take.

Let us look at these operations for a moment: Agricola advanced north-eastward, from the Forth about Stirling to the Tay about Perth, and on up Strathmore, blocking with a fort the mouth of each major glen debouching from the Highlands, as far as the Tay at Inchtuthil, near Dunkeld.   This we can now see from the sites of the forts, which, unlike the temporary camp-sites, *are* securely dated.   The northern tribes, uniting in face of the common danger, took the offensive, Tacitus tells us, and actually dared to attack a Roman fort; which so alarmed some of Agricola's officers that they counselled retreat behind the Forth.   The point of their alarm is much clearer now that we know where Agricola's northern forts were: the capture of one of his forts blocking the glens—say that at Bochastle, near Callander—

would have let the enemy through *on to his line of communication.*   Failing to capture the fort, the Britons then regrouped and came forward again in several bands; whereat Agricola, "fearing to be cut off" as Tacitus says, regrouped his own army into three forces (each of one legion plus attached troops?) in order to sweep the country.   Once more the Britons—they seem to have been very ably commanded—changed their plan.   They concentrated all their force, and fell by night upon the camp of the IXth Legion, from York, which had been depleted by the Emperor Domitian's order to Agricola to send detachments to the Rhine; and the last major event of the campaign was the rescue of the IXth by the arrival of Agricola's own column, when fighting was taking place actually inside the lines.

The campaign of 83 thus shows the Romans always concerned for their communications.   Thus, if a powerful Caledonian army took up a position anywhere on his line of advance, Agricola would feel forced to deal with it before advancing further.   Tacitus' account of 83 also gives us a glimpse of the very sensible strategy by which the Britons forced continual counter-marches and redeployments upon the Romans and spun out the time.   By similar methods, we must suppose, they spun out the time in Agricola's last campaign too, so that even when he did win a victory in battle it was too late in the season to occupy the ground he had marched over.   How important that was to be they could not know at the time; but in fact, though the campaign ended with a tactical defeat, they had won a strategic victory. The Emperor, with trouble brewing on the Danube, decided that he could not afford the "running sore" of the northern campaigns.   He recalled Agricola, and shortly afterwards transferred at least one of his legions to Central Europe.

To sum up, then: What we require for the battlefield of Mons Craupius is a position somewhere near the northern end of our chain of Roman camp-sites; a position where hills, then wooded at the top and in rear, rise steeply from level ground, on which chariots could operate; and a position giving room for a battle-line nearly two miles long *and* (even then) room on the flanks for the Britons to attempt an outflanking movement and for Agricola's reserve cavalry—2000 strong—to catch them with a counter-charge.

There must also be a Roman camp-site just on the edge of the battlefield; for Agricola's heavy-armed infantry, in his second line, are said to have been drawn up "before the entrenchments."

I have *not* found any known Roman camp-site that satisfies all the conditions perfectly; but there is one position, on a line between the camps at Ythan Wells and Auchinhove, which fits the physical conditions.   It is also about on the frontier, as one would judge from Ptolemy's *Geography*, between the powerful Caledonian tribe of the Central Highlands and the smaller tribes in the lowlands of Angus and Buchan, which Agricola had been traversing hitherto.   The Caledonians extended right across the Highlands, from

Lennox to Moray; they appear as Dicalydones in a later writer—perhaps the "two peoples of the Caledonians." Such an extensive territory would necessarily contain subdivisions, and *one of their component tribes* might thus be the Boresti, whom Ptolemy does not name. The proud Caledonians might well make an attempt at a stand now that their own frontier was threatened; and especially since Agricola was now endangering their best corn-land, around Elgin, in the late northern harvest-time.

This position is between Knock Hill and the Pass of Grange, east of Keith. The steep ridge of Sillyearn Hill, about two miles long, rises sharply from gently undulating low ground by the Shiel Burn; south of it is the Pass of Grange, where the hills close upon Strath Isla; north of it is the half-mile gap by Sillyearn hamlet, and beyond that, the conspicuous cone of Knock Hill, 1400 ft. high, with a wide view over the Moray Firth. (Crub, a heap: Mons Craupius: could this, I wonder, be no other than Knock Hill?) If this suggestion is, by any good fortune, right, then Agricola's first aim would be to clear the enemy off the Sillyearn ridge; the British chariots would counter-attack from between the ridge and Knock Hill, and perhaps also, if the ground was not too boggy there, from the Pass of Grange; and the hilltops on the flanks, on which more Britons could be seen, would be Knock Hill itself, and perhaps also the prominent hills of the Meikle and Little Balloch, away beyond the river.

There is, I must repeat, so far no known Roman camp-site in the right place for this theory; Auchinhove is the camp of the Romans *after* they had secured the Pass of Grange. But Auchinhove itself is a recent discovery, and it is much more than the average step of ten miles or so from the last known camp by the Wells of Ythan. There is room for another camp between; and if there was a battle for the Pass of Grange, it may well remain to be found in Rothiemay parish, somewhere near the side-road that leads off to Fordyce.