

Caledonia and its occupation under the Flavians

J G F Hind*

Tacitus mentions *Caledonia* and its inhabitants (*incolentes populi; civitates*), whom he calls Britons, four times in his *De Vita Agricolae*. Each time it is the area north of the line between the Forth and Clyde estuaries which is so designated (*Agricola* 10; 27). A number of separate peoples made up the inhabitants (*Agricola* 25; 29.4, to be taken together with 31.5). The picture is clear and internally consistent, and not inconsistent with the other sources, given that they are either very general and poetic in tone, or topographical and list-like in form. The writers of the 1st century AD seem to have thought of *Caledonia* vaguely in connection with forests (Pliny, *NH* 4.102; Silius Italicus, *Punica* 3, 597–8); wild seas (Lucan, *Pharsalia* 6.37), and wild bears (Martial, *Spect.* 7), and with a very remote people (Martial 10.44.1).

In his *Agricola* Tacitus notoriously offers little by way of topography, yet he does give three place-names relating to this area. The Forth (*Bodotria*, if that is the correct form, for Ptolemy gives *Boderia*, and the Ravenna Cosmographer, *Bdora*) and the Clyde (*Clota*) are said to be the delimiting estuaries to the south of *Caledonia*. *Mons Graupius*, or *Craupius*, was the site of the culminating victory of Agricola over the peoples of *Caledonia*. Wherever this was precisely, it presumably was in the hands of one of the constituent tribes of *Caledonia*, which, we learn from Tacitus, included the *Boresti*, and, we can infer from Ptolemy, included the *Vakomagoi*, *Taizaloi*, *Venikonos* and perhaps the *Dumnonioi* (fig 1).

In Tacitus, our most circumstantial source, *Caledonia* is a region of *Britannia*, almost another island, and its peoples, though *Britanni*, are physically somewhat different from the rest (*rutillae Caledoniam habitantium comae*, *Agr.* 11). They appear to have formed a confederation of tribes, at least in time of war (*civitates trans Bodotriam sitas*, *Agr.* 25; *Caledoniam incolentes populi*, *Agr.* 25; *legationibus et foederibus omnium civitatum vires exciverant*, *Agr.* 29) – ‘peoples situated beyond the Forth’; ‘peoples inhabiting Caledonia’; ‘they had brought out all the peoples in strength by sending envoys and invoking treaties’. Tacitus estimated their total strength in battle at some 30 000 fighting men, of which they lost a third in casualties at *Mons Graupius*. There is no way of checking this figure, but it tallies with the view that several tribes were involved.

Later, Florus knows of a *saltus c.* and *silvas c.* (i.12, 45); Cassius Dio speaks of two peoples, *Maiatai* and *Kaledonioi* (the Greek form), of which the former lived nearer to the Wall (ie Hadrian’s Wall), and the latter further to the north (Cassius Dio, 75.5; 76.12; 15). The emperor, Septimius Severus, campaigned against the *Kaledonioi*, probably in AD 209 and against both peoples the following year. Late in the next century Ammianus Marcellinus knew of two branches of the Picts, one of whom he calls *Verturiones* and the other *Dicaledones* (*A.M.* 27.8.5; Mann 1974, *passim*). These latter are clearly descendants of the *Kaledonioi* of the early 3rd century, and the former may be descendants of the *Maiatai*. A similar prefix, *Due-Caledones*, had appeared

* School of History, University of Leeds, LS2 9JT

studied by B Clark (1963, 191–5). He came to the conclusion that it comprised, above all, the area from Stirling to Menteith, and from Lochaber in the north-west as far as Atholl towards the north-east. Ptolemy regarded the ‘Forest’ as being ‘above’ (ie to the north or north-west of) the people he calls *Kaledonioi*. If the people took their name from the mountainous and forested area, then they probably dwelt in the main glens and straths to the south of the massif (Hanson and Macinnes come close to this view (1981, 103)). Ptolemy is in fact more specific about the *Kaledonioi*; their lands stretched from *Lemannonios Kolpos*, ‘The Elm-Tree River Gulf’, on the Atlantic coast and *Varar Eiskhusis*, ‘Varar Estuary’ (Ptol. *Geogr.* 2.3.12), on the North Sea coast. It is certain that *Varar* is the Beaully River (also known as Farrar) on the Moray Firth at the northern end of Loch Ness (the Great Glen), but the identity of *Lemannonios Kolpos* has been treated with some ambivalence, not to say waywardness. It ought to be Loch Long or Loch Fyne from its positioning by Ptolemy south of Kintyre, but, in spite of this, Richmond placed it further north, and Rivet and Smith suggested that the text is in error, so that the *Kaledonioi* of Ptolemy could be said to stretch from sea to sea along the Great Glen, with their most southerly point being Loch Linnhe (Firth of Lorne) on the Atlantic Sea coast (Richmond 1944, 40, n 55; 1958, 135–6; Rivet & Smith 1979, 107, 133, 140–1, 189–91). Rivet and Smith posit some error which has caused the geographer to bring the *Caledonii* down to the west coast too far south, near Lennox (*na Leamnaich*), near which they rightly take to be *Lemannonios Kolpos* – present day, Loch Fyne or Loch Long (Rivet & Smith 1979, 133, 387).

All subsequent modern writers seem to locate Ptolemy’s *Kaledonioi*, and by implication, the main tribes of Tacitus’ Caledonian confederacy either in the Great Glen (OS *Map of Roman Britain*, ed 4, 1978, North Sheet and p 15; Breeze 1982, 30), or in the Highland massif to its south (Clark 1958, 49; Hanson & Maxwell 1983, 4). Neither is in the least plausible, since the land could not support a population that would be able to lead so powerful a confederacy. It is doubtful that any tribe dwelt high up in the Grampians at any time in antiquity in sufficient numbers to become politically dominant over the lowland tribes of *Caledonia*, and the same is probably true also of the Great Glen. What is more, if centred in the Glen, it is certain that the people would have had little direct contact with the Romans during their occupation of Perthshire, Angus and the Mearns.

The alternative, which seems to me much more likely, is that the *Kaledonioi* of Ptolemy did stretch from Loch Fyne or Loch Long to the Beaully Firth, but around the southern and eastern edges of the Highland massif, and not the western and northern edges, as modern scholars have assumed. Like the *Caledoniam incolentes* of Tacitus, they embraced the wide straths and lower glens from Loch Lomond (near Loch Long), and included the upper Forth, Earn, Tay, Isla and the Mearns, and the coastal plains around the Grampians as far as the Farrar. In terms of Scottish counties the confederacy would control Stirlingshire, Perthshire, Kincardineshire, Angus, Aberdeenshire, Moray and Nairn. This supposes that they controlled all the good, well-populated, land of central and north-eastern Scotland, with a probable centre in Perthshire. The fact that Ptolemy assigns to them no populated centres (*poleis*) could be explained if the *Vakomagoi*, *Taizaloi*, *Venikones*, and maybe the *Dumnonioi*, were all part of the Caledonian grouping of tribes mentioned above. These had *poleis*, according to Ptolemy, which may have been, in the main, native centres, some with Roman forts quartered among them (Rivet 1977, 45–64). *Bannatia*, *Tamia*, *Pinnata Castra* and *Tuessis*, assigned to the *Vakomagoi*, *Devana* assigned to the *Taizaloi* or *Taixaloi*, *Horrea*, to the *Venikones*, were all within the Caledonian area. The situation of the *Dumnonioi* is more problematical, since two of their six *poleis* lay probably on the Forth–Clyde line, three to the north and one to its south (Rivet & Smith 1979, 139–40). If this tribe straddled the Forth–Clyde line, they could conceivably have contributed to the Caledon-

ian hostility to the Romans, since by the fourth campaign's activities, Agricola had been seeking to cut off the more southerly peoples from contacts with the north by building forts at certain points on that line across Britain.

Strong support, for the view that the centre of the *Caledonii* proper was in the Tay valley and Strathmore, comes in the form of place-names in the Upper Tay valley which reflect their presence precisely in this region – Dunkeld (once *Dunchaillean*, *Dunchailden* (Jackson 1954, 14–16)). Their name appears likewise in the nearby mountains and hillforts, Rohallion, Schiehallion (Watson 1926, 21). If further confirmation were needed of the importance of Perthshire, it is to hand in the proliferation of monuments on Tayside, in the Iron Age and Dark Age (Childe 1953, Map IV; Coutts 1970, 27–68). In the Dark Age too, the Picts (whom Ammianus divided into *Verturiones* and *Dicaledones*) inhabited this same range of territory, which we have supposed Ptolemy intended for his *Kaledonioi*. The seven provinces of the Picts were Strathearn and Menteith, Atholl and Gower, Fife, Angus and the Mearns, Marr and Buchan, Moray and Ross, Caithness (Wainwright 1955, 46–7). At least the first six were, if we can so interpret Ptolemy, within the area of Kaledonian control (see also Alcock 1980, 61–2). We might assume that the *Vakomagoi* were a major element, if not the major element, in the Caledonian grouping of tribes in the earlier period of Roman expansion. A similar conclusion was reached by Maxwell (1980, 7). Only later did the *populi Caledoniam incolentes* come to take on the regional name as a people, perhaps in the later 2nd or early 3rd century, somewhat like the *Franci*, *Saxones* and *Alamanni* in Germany (Mann 1974, 40–1). As to the other more northerly peoples of Scotland who are presented by Ptolemy without town centres of population (*Dekantai*, *Lougoi*, *Smertai*, *Kornavioi*, *Kairenoi*, *Karnonakai*, *Kreones*, *Epidioi*), these were mainly coastal population groups, who may have been recorded by Agricola's fleet in the fifth campaign, and when it rounded *Caledonia* and the Orkneys in the final year (seventh) of his campaigns (*Agricola* 38). If so, they were probably small groups who did not cover the interior so much as appears in the OS *Map of Roman Britain* and elsewhere (eg Maxwell 1980, 3; Breeze 1982, 30; Hanson & Maxwell 1983, 4). It is most unlikely that they formed any significant part of the Caledonian *civitates* who fought Agricola at *Mons Graupius*; those were probably the tribes settled south and east of the Mounth.

There is an interesting consequence of this re-deployment of the the *Caledonii* and of the recognition that the Upper Glens, including the Great Glen, held no great power base which could challenge the Romans. It becomes clear why the Roman forts of the next to the last decade of the 1st century AD were so heavily concentrated in Stirlingshire, Kinross-shire, Perthshire and Angus – 12 forts north of the isthmus, some having two periods. Ardoch, Strageath, Cardean and Stracathro were intended to hold down the Caledonian peoples (*Dumnonioi* or perhaps *Boresti* and *Vakomagoi*?) in their main areas of Strathallan, Strathearn, Strathmore and Strathtay. The line of so-called 'glen-blocking' forts, located further to the west and north, at Drumquassle, Bochastle, Dalginross, Fendoch, and the legionary fortress itself at Inchtuthil, have been interpreted variously. Richmond, followed by most modern scholars, thought that they were intended (perhaps by Agricola) to prevent the *Caledonii* from beyond the occupied area attacking down the glens (Richmond 1955, 45; 1958 50–1; Frere 1981, 89–91). More recently doubts have been expressed about this reason for their disposition. D J Breeze, for instance, following a hint by J Mann, thinks that the forts may have been intended to act as springboards for expeditions up the glens (Mann 1968, 308; Breeze 1982, 55). But if we take into account the likelihood that significant centres of population, and thus a substantial threat, apart from some fugitives, did not exist in the upper glens, still less on the mountains, we may seek a different solution to the problem of the purpose of the forts. The forts indeed appear to be 'glen-blocking', but rather in the opposite sense from the one Richmond had in mind. Surely, their main purpose would be to

maintain surveillance over the defeated, and temporarily occupied inhabitants of the fertile areas of *Caledonia*. If the forts along the main line of Strathearn and Strathmore did this job in the centre of the area, the 'glen-blocking' forts were intended to hold the people back from leaving their fields and decamping up the glens, a situation that lasted only some seven or eight years from AD 83/4 to 90 (see Hanson 1980, 30, on Fendoch). It is no accident that these forts were also fringing the probable extent of the 'Caledonian high forest', the *Kaledonios Drumos*.

If this argument is true for the 'glen-blocking' auxiliary forts – that they were enforcing a policy of *deductio in planitiem*, keeping the *Caledonii* at civilian pursuits in the *straths* – then it is true also for the legionary base at Inchtuthil, just north of the bend in the River Tay (Frere 1981, 92–4). It lay a few miles downstream from Dunkeld, maybe even then the stronghold of the main group of the *Caledonii*. Most likely it was sited with the intention of cutting off the farmers and ordinary tribesmen from access to their hillfort rallying centres and from flight up the Tay Gorge. The advanced and seemingly exposed situation of the fortress, which has often been remarked upon, could be explained thus. It was not a frontier post designed to keep back untamed raiders, but a garrison, planted deliberately and precisely to keep watch on the recently defeated peoples of Strathmore and Strath Tay. There was no point in placing auxiliary forts in advance of it, ie higher up the Tay Gorge, since the main threat actually lay in the reverse direction to the south and north-east, where the line of auxiliary forts actually was. Like the commander of a legion on the Rhine in the early years of Augustus, the legate of the legion at Inchtuthil was looking back into recently conquered territory, as much as, if not more than, beyond into untouched barbarian land. More close in time and space, Agricola had himself only recently surrounded defeated peoples with forts in the Pennines and North England (*Agr.* 20.3, *civitates praesidiis castellisque circumdatae*), preventing population groups escaping into the highlands.

If Strathmore and the Mearns were as important as is here supposed, then Tacitus' view that Britain had been 'conquered, then let go', is even more understandable than under the hypothesis normally held (*tum primum perdomita est, Agr.* 10; *perdomita Britannia et statim missa, Hist.* 1.2.1). The Northern peoples had been subdued between AD 83/4 and 90; the wedge-shaped mass of the unproductive land, interspersed with firths and the interminable shore-line (*Agr.* 10.4–6), had been left alone after the exploration by the fleet. The Romans were not interested in ruling rocks. After the battle at *Mons Graupius* they clearly controlled the major centres of the *Caledonii* in Strathmore, Strath Tay and Glen Isla. The only remaining opposition to them would be relatively minor – the cowed, but not occupied, tribesmen of Aberdeenshire, Buchan and Moray. The upper glens, I suggest, contained nothing but a few irreconcilables and refugees, not whole tribes ready to threaten the briefly held extension to the Roman *provincia* in *Caledonia*. The Roman retreat from north of the Forth would, on this theory, have been occasioned not by British threats from beyond the *provincia*, but by general strategic considerations in the Empire as a whole, especially by the need for troops on the Danube (*Agr.* 41). But this conclusion is commonly arrived at by specialists in the area and period (Breeze 1982, 60–1; Hanson & Maxwell 1983, 43–4). It was only when *Caledonia* had been evacuated that a significant population group was free to become hostile to the alien power again, later to emerge as the *Maiatai* and *Kaledonioi*.

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