

History, archaeology and Roman Scotland

Michael G Jarrett*

SUMMARY

There is too little Roman documentation for an adequate history of Roman Scotland to be written. There is a consequent desire, and perhaps a need, to use archaeological material as a support or substitute. Some aspects of the consequent problems are examined in the light of recent discoveries on and interpretations of the Roman frontiers.

The last 20 years have seen a vast increase in the amount of archaeological evidence available for all periods and for all regions of Britain. The quality of the evidence has also improved. The character of the new material is of various kinds. New sites are constantly being discovered by fieldwork and by aerial photography. The number of excavations has increased greatly; and excavations have tended to be on a much larger scale than formerly, greatly enhancing the potential reliability of the conclusions drawn.

These factors have all played their part in changing our understanding of Roman Scotland. We must, however, be aware that new evidence is still appearing annually. To the outsider it seems that not a year passes without the discovery of new forts and temporary camps; and it is to the credit of those working in this field that many new sites are subjected to excavation within a very short time of their discovery. Admittedly, with two main periods of Roman occupation of very different character it is often easy to guess at the likely date(s) of a Roman fort, but it is still important to have confirmation. Without it we might easily draw a totally false picture.

In contrast to Roman military sites, which may be assumed to belong to one of a limited number of patterns of occupation externally ordered, civilian 'native' sites present much greater difficulties of interpretation. While a site may be datable on general grounds to the first five centuries AD it can only be related to the Roman occupation or abandonment of Scotland after extensive excavation coupled with considerable good fortune. Many similar sites will be excavated before a convincing pattern emerges, if it ever does. This means that any account of Scotland during the centuries of Roman Britain is likely to be heavily biased towards the Roman evidence.

This is of course compounded by the (random) survival of a certain amount of documentary evidence from the Roman world; a little of this relates to the native population, but it is written by Romans for Roman readers. Little of what survives suggests that Roman ethnographers were careful or reliable observers; most were not observers at all but collectors of reports and travellers' tales at second and third hand, writers more at home in the library than in the field. It is unrewarding, and nigh impossible, to relate their statements to the archaeological evidence.

When we turn to military and political history we might hope to find archaeological and

*Dept of Archaeology, University College, Cardiff

documentary evidence blending to produce a single coherent story. Such a hope is illusory. If it were not there would be little scope for excavation, which is a remarkably expensive way of obtaining information, justifiable only when there is no cheaper alternative. The first problem is that Roman historians were Romans, writing at Rome for other Romans: the details of a distant province were irrelevant and could be omitted. Moreover, history was a part of literature with its own rules which did not include a need to seek objectivity or to admit to ignorance. It is of interest that the ancient writer who probably comes closest to our ideas of a historian is St Luke.

Because of their backgrounds and attitudes the Roman historians who mention Britain are excessively brief and infuriatingly vague. To this may be added a propensity for including material which is of scant interest to the modern scholar. The classic example is probably Cassius Dio, admittedly abridged for a medieval Byzantine readership. He tells us of a serious disaster to the Roman army during the reign of Commodus, in which the governor of Britain was killed with his accompanying troops by barbarians who had crossed the wall which separated them from the Roman forts. Commodus sent Ulpius Marcellus to deal with the situation, and he ruthlessly put down the barbarians. Seventy-five percent of what Dio says is concerned with the eccentricities of Marcellus. In the remainder of the passage we are given no indication of the date, of the scale of Roman casualties, of the native tribes involved or the area of campaigning. Much modern controversy would have been avoided if Dio had indicated whether the Wall was Hadrian's or that of Antoninus.

Some of the gaps can be filled from other evidence. An inscription from Castlecary suggests most strongly that, at a date between c 175 and 190, *legio VI Victrix* received a detachment of experienced soldiers from Noricum (RIB 2148): the most likely occasion is the disaster recorded by Dio. Coins of 184 record victory in Britain, presumably in that year or in 183 (RIC *Commodus* 437; 440). Marcellus is associated with the building of an aqueduct and another structure at Chesters on Hadrian's Wall (RIB 1463; 1464). Another inscription, from Benwell, indicates that the fort was occupied, and has been interpreted to show that Marcellus was appointed in 180, though not all scholars accept this interpretation (RIB 1329; cf Jarrett 1978). Opinions differ as to whether this governorship marked the rebuilding of Hadrian's Wall (Period II) or the Antonine Wall (Period II) or neither. John Casey has pointed out to me that there is a strong and attractive case (which he plans to publish in detail) for thinking that the activities of Marcellus may have extended well to the north of Hadrian's Wall. If he was campaigning from 181 to 183 we should certainly expect some major changes, even if Dio did not record them. Our problems are compounded by the fact that the memory of Commodus was condemned after his assassination and inscriptions bearing his name were cast down. They are rare throughout the empire and none survives in Britain. With their destruction we have doubtless lost other information about the activities of Marcellus.

When we turn to the Severan campaigns of 208–210 Dio is little more precise. Two tribes, the Caledones and the Maeatae, are named and even located after a fashion; but so vaguely that some modern scholars place the Maeatae to the north and others to the south of the Antonine Wall. No place-name survives in Dio, though this may be because British place-names meant even less in 12th-century Byzantium than third-century Rome. Beyond this we have only the reported intention to conquer the whole island and a reference to astronomical observations to indicate that some at least of the campaigning took place well to the north of the Forth–Clyde line. Once we have accepted that we can point to temporary camps which may belong to these campaigns. We still have no idea of how he proposed to hold 'the whole island'; possibly his permanent dispositions were never made. The only sites in Scotland which seem to have been occupied are Carpow, Cramond and possibly Old Kilpatrick.

The earliest work of Tacitus, the *Agricola*, is the biography of a man who probably spent a dozen or more years in Britain at various stages of a career whose apogee was the governorship of the province in 77/8 to 83/5; but it recorded only seven place-names and five tribes. Three of these twelve cannot be located with any certainty.

This geographical uncertainty makes it difficult to interpret Agricola's campaigns, while providing plentiful material for speculation and controversy. The Laird of Monkbarns was neither the first nor the last antiquary to be obsessed with the site of Mons Graupius, which remains as elusive as ever. Recently Professor St Joseph has made out a strong case for placing it at Bennachie. On present evidence this looks the most likely contender for the site of Agricola's great victory, though only discoveries at the site will prove the point. We should remember that the location of more temporary camps of Flavian types may lead to other suggestions in future; 30 years ago Bennachie would probably have seemed impossibly far north.

The search for Mons Graupius is perhaps most significant as the symptom of our struggle to relate historical documents to the evidence of archaeology. There is too little of either for us to feel any great confidence in any proposed solutions. Great efforts have been made to identify different groups of camps and to associate them with campaigns recorded by Roman writers; and some success has been achieved. We perhaps forget that there may have been many campaigns which escaped such record but left traces on the ground. No sites have yet been proposed as evidence for the various fourth-century campaigns against the Picts, yet we have no reason to suppose that the late Roman army did not protect its encampments in hostile territory. We have two principal groups of camps of the late first century. These are conveniently assigned to the sixth and seventh campaigns of Agricola, in complete ignorance of the activities of his successor.

Once upon a time – say 20 years ago – Flavian Scotland was a simple affair of invasion and fort-building by Agricola, followed at once by the abandonment of his northern conquests and of virtually all forts north of the Forth, and a dozen or so years later by withdrawal to the Tyne–Solway line. Archaeological evidence has multiplied since then and still expands apace. The complexity of the data has been paralleled by the complexity of interpretations on offer, despite the fact that these are liable to modification in the light of new discoveries. Two recent accounts of Roman activities in Scotland have already suffered in this way (Breeze 1982; Hanson & Maxwell 1983). Their interpretations of the Flavian period require substantial modification to take account of the discovery of a fort at Doune (Maxwell 1984) and should be read in conjunction with St Joseph's very different (and more traditional) interpretations (Pitts & St Joseph 1985). St Joseph incidentally provides a far more useful map for this period than will be found in either of the other works.

Tacitus records that in his third season (79/80) Agricola reached the Tay; the fourth year was devoted to consolidation, including the establishment of forts between Clyde and Forth; the next campaign began with a sea-crossing and ended with Agricola's army on the coast facing Ireland, therefore either in the Rhins of Galloway or the Mull of Kintyre. The sixth season involved close co-operation with the fleet, in an area north of the Forth where forts already existed, since they were attacked by the Caledonians; subsequently the army operated in three divisions. Agricola's last season was dominated by Mons Graupius, evidently to be placed far north of the Forth. After it a leisurely return to his base took him through the land of the unidentifiable Boresti. In the ensuing winter (83/4 or 84/5) he handed over to his successor a peaceful and secure province.

Excavations and reappraisals in recent years have established that Agricola's forts between Clyde and Forth do not underlie those of the Antonine Wall; Hanson & Maxwell (1983) regard Castlecary, Mumrills and Cadder as possibly Agricolan, though they would admit that the case is

far from proved. At no other Antonine Wall fort is there any case to be made. The only certain Agricolan sites are Camelon and the newly discovered small fort at Mollins, with Barochan Hill to the west and Elginhaugh to the east of the isthmus. Two forts do not enable us to establish the line chosen by Agricola, and if we are looking at the isthmus we must await further discoveries. The new fort at Doune suggests that Agricola's line may have lain well to the north of that of the Antonine Wall, close to the edge of the Highlands. Maxwell suggests that it would consist of forts at Dumbarton (not known, but reasonably postulated), Drumquhassle, Malling, Bochastle, Doune and near Stirling (not located); St Joseph rightly questions the outlying fort at Bochastle as part of this scheme, since it is in a weak position and produces a quite unnecessary salient in the line. Bochastle is in any case a problem, but surely makes better sense as an addition made when the advance north came in the sixth season, and when a scheme was evidently drawn up for a road with forts leading towards Strathmore, with 'glen-blocking' forts to its north-west. The other sites of the 'Clyde-Forth line' fitted neatly into this new scheme, and may indeed have been planned with this in mind should the emperor grant permission for an advance.

Opinion seems to be hardening to the view that the legionary fortress at Inchtuthil and most other forts beyond the Forth were constructed not by Agricola but by his unknown successor, though Pitts and St Joseph in their definitive report on Inchtuthil favour an Agricolan origin so strongly that they do not give any detailed consideration to the alternative; it deserves discussion though not necessarily acceptance. Certainty is not possible, and it would be sensible if all agreed on that if on nothing else. Breeze's extreme view that 'it is probable that no forts were constructed by Agricola north of the Forth' is unlikely to meet with much support. Something here depends on the date preferred for Agricola's governorship; he arrived late in the summer of either 77 or 78, and left after six further summers, therefore in either 83/4 or 84/5. Scholarly opinion remains evenly balanced. Inchtuthil was demolished before completion; mint coins of 86 in the demolition levels provide a *terminus post quem*. Nothing certainly later has come from any of the single-period forts. At Inchtuthil the labour camps exhibit two phases of use. While its internal buildings were of timber the fortress was given a stone wall, perhaps a modification to the original scheme. Demolition at Inchtuthil must surely be assigned to 86 or 87, and the construction work must have occupied at least two seasons; three seasons is not inconceivable.

A post-Agricolan date depends on two linked assumptions, neither of which can be proved: that fort-building would only occur after campaigning was finished, and that it could not occur in the same season as campaigning. But such evidence as we have suggests that the campaigning season probably lasted only from May to September, giving ample time for other activities; building in timber is possible in times of frost; and clearly Agricola built forts at times other than his fourth year. Having described this appropriate activity for his ideal governor under that year Agricola had no need to mention it again, any more than he needed to mention the provision of civic amenities after its record in the second year.

If we accept, as I believe we should, the later date for Agricola it is possible that building began in his sixth or seventh season. Even sites not begun or completed under Agricola might still have been planned by him. It is improbable that Agricola had made no plans for garrisoning the area he had conquered. The account of his sixth season clearly implies that there were forts north of the Forth; Breeze's plea that Tacitus does not specifically say so is unwontedly perverse. If forts existed they were presumably intended to be 'permanent', ie to remain as long as they were required. It is not unreasonable to suppose that they formed part of some overall scheme, whether or not that scheme was yet completed.

There are two main elements in that scheme. First is a road with regularly spaced forts running in a virtually straight line from Doune up Strathallan into Strathmore at least as far as

Stracathro near the North Esk. This marks the main line of advance and presumably the principal supply route. A short distance north-west of this is another 'line' of forts on the edge of the Highlands, placed at the mouths of the major glens; Inchtuthil in the Tay valley is the most important of these. This line is more apparent on the map than on the ground. There is no evidence for a road linking these forts and on topographical grounds none is to be expected. They are traditionally seen as blocking the exits from the glens, whence hostile highlanders might debouch to threaten the supply route. This was probably one initial function for them, but Breeze is surely right to see them as bases for an advance up the glens which was presumably planned as the next major conquest. It would be a natural consequence of Mons Graupius. Yet Inchtuthil suggests more than this. Like Chester it is suitable as a base for advance in two directions: up Strath Tay to Killiecrankie and beyond, and also continuing the main line through the Mearns towards Aberdeen and the Moray Firth. Flavian marching camps indicate that the latter area was known to the Romans, and occupation of territory as far as Inverness may have been intended; if it was, a road across the Highlands would seem to be essential. Exploration of the area to determine the best routes across may be a further explanation of the advanced forts: while the disposition of forts indicates that the Romans had a clear idea of the geography of Scotland this can only have been achieved by a considerable amount of scouting in the years before final conquest.

Whatever Agricola's plans were they came to nothing. Crises nearer home compelled Domitian to withdraw troops from Britain, though we need no longer suppose that in 83 all Agricola's legions were below strength (Kennedy 1983): the withdrawal of vexillations is better placed later in the 80s, and may be connected with the abandonment of Strathmore rather than its occupation. By 92 at the latest one of the four legions, *II Adiutrix*, had been permanently transferred to the Danube. It may have left as early as 86. That is the earliest possible date for the abandonment of Inchtuthil; but it is far from certain that the legionary fortress at Wroxeter was given up as early as this.

Current opinion is that for a brief period after the retreat from Strathmore occupation continued as far north as the Earn. Ardoch and Strageath both show two periods of Flavian occupation, and it is thought that the second of these followed the withdrawal from Strathmore. Strageath seems to be the pivot of a system of closely spaced wooden towers extending south to Ardoch and north-east along the Gask Ridge towards Bertha (Perth). These, it is suggested, represent a short-lived frontier protecting the (possibly) pro-Roman folk of Fife from their anti-Roman neighbours. They seem pretty inadequate to thwart more than small raiding parties, and it is difficult to see that the garrisons of two forts can have been regarded as a match for Caledonian forces even after Mons Graupius. The evidence for this particular phase is far from conclusive: the 'Gask Frontier' depends more on our difficulty in fitting it into our model of Agricolan activity than it does on firm evidence for a separate existence. We may note that Doune to the south appears to have only one period of occupation, and also that the towers appear to be of two types and are not necessarily part of the same system (Frere & St Joseph 1983, 135–6). The towers and the first period at Ardoch and Strageath could well belong to the middle years of Agricola, with the second period corresponding with the advance into Strathmore.

The latest relevant coin from either site is of 86. Breeze goes beyond the limits of reasonable speculation when he uses the second period at these two sites to suggest that the 'road' forts as far as Stracathro may have been occupied after the abandonment of Inchtuthil; when we have some evidence from the four or more sites in question it may be the time to advance such a hypothesis.

New discoveries have come as fast in the Lowlands as they have further north. They have, however, merely been adding detail to a known pattern of occupation. The time for reappraisal will presumably come with the discovery of the postulated sites west of Gatehouse of Fleet and of Loudoun Hill; there can be little doubt that these sites remain to be discovered, since neither fort makes any strategic sense without other sites beyond it. It is after the withdrawal from Strathmore that the Lowlands engage our interest.

Now that we no longer believe in Agricolan sites below those of the Antonine Wall we no longer have cause to carry Flavian II occupation as far north as the Forth–Clyde line. It has become increasingly clear in recent years that from the late 80s Roman occupation did not extend beyond a line from Glenlochar to Newstead, though there are suggestions of activity at Loudoun Hill (with no less than four Flavian building periods) and perhaps at Castlecary. The new forts at Newstead and Dalswinton were both larger and more strongly defended than their predecessors. Hanson & Maxwell suggest that these forts may have been bases for long-range patrols, and also that some of the troops withdrawn from Scotland may have been located in the Lake District which does not seem to have been garrisoned before about 90. In this brief period nothing suggests that there was an organized frontier – still a new concept to the Romans; nor does the Glenlochar–Newstead line seem to take account of tribal boundaries. It is indeed difficult to see that it represents more than the furthest line to which the available troops could be stretched.

In any case the line was not held. Probably as a result of enemy action forts north of the Tyne–Solway line were abandoned in the early second century. Agricola's road between Carlisle and Corbridge, the Stanegate, became the effective frontier. Extra forts and fortlets were added to it under Trajan, though it is not clear that there was an overall plan. In recent years we have learned that the Stanegate was extended west of Carlisle to Kirkbride close to Moricambe Bay [*not* Morecambe, as Hanson & Maxwell 1983, 48]. East of Corbridge the route of road and frontier remains uncertain, though the discovery of an earth and timber fort at Whickham, west of Gateshead, indicates that we should be looking south of the river. We should have expected this, since Corbridge marks the lowest crossing of the Tyne until the reign of Hadrian. Presumably at least one more fort is to be expected between Corbridge and Whickham, with another east of Whickham, since South Shields is known to be Hadrianic.

If these deductions about the Stanegate are correct we have an adequate explanation of the early move of the fighting garrison of Hadrian's Wall into new forts on the line of the Wall itself. With bridges only at Corbridge and Newcastle this stretch of the Stanegate was thoroughly impractical as a base for troops; the same may have been true in the western sector, where the Irthing cannot be forded when in spate.

Recent excavations have greatly increased our knowledge of Hadrian's Wall, notably with the recovery of most of the plan of Wallsend fort. Also increased is the amount of the Wall accessible to visitors. While they are of great interest these new discoveries do not necessitate any serious reinterpretation of the Wall during the reign of its builder. Breeze (1982) makes much of the fact that we have no firm evidence for a walkway on top of the Wall, though its existence is usually assumed – as it is on his own dust-jacket. Abandoning the walkway leaves him without an adequate explanation of the width of the curtain wall. More important is his recognition that at only two milecastles have we evidence for a causeway across the Wall-ditch; there is a similar lack of a causeway at many of the forts on the Antonine Wall. Since all interpretations of Phase I of Hadrian's Wall assume that milecastles provided gates by which civilians and army units might cross the frontier line there is clearly an urgent need for excavation outside several milecastles to determine whether a bridge was provided or whether a primary causeway had been removed at a later date. If there is evidence for neither it will be necessary to think again about the way in

which the Wall operated. Any such reappraisal will need to take account of the functions of the Vallum. Established in Phase II, it created a military zone through which civilian passage was only permitted at the new forts of this Phase. The Vallum is not a defensive (or even defensible) earthwork and can have nothing to do with (unproven) Brigantian hostility.

Over the last decade our understanding of the Antonine Wall has developed enormously, even though we are no closer to determining the reason for the return to a Forth–Clyde frontier. Its planning and construction can be seen to relate more closely to those of Hadrian's Wall than was once thought. It is now clear that the Antonine Wall went through considerable changes between its original planning and its completion. The first intention seems to have been to build in stone, for the fort at Balmuilty has stone walls with projecting wings as though a stone curtain was expected. On the other hand the stone walls of Castlecary suggest that the builders expected the curtain to be of turf; but this may simply mean that the defences of Castlecary were built rather later than those of Balmuilty, when turf was already being used for the curtain. Both these forts are amongst the six or so primary forts, each large enough to contain a complete auxiliary unit; to this primary stage also belong a number of fortlets, comparable in size with the milecastles of Hadrian's Wall. Breeze suggests that they may also have been regularly spaced, perhaps at mile intervals: this could prove to be a useful hypothesis, but it is no more than that so far. Following the discovery of fortlets the search has begun for turrets on the Antonine Wall, but so far without success. Before the building of the Wall was completed the scheme was modified by the addition of another ten or twelve smaller forts. No clear reason for this modification is discernible, but it is only recently that the modification itself has been recognized.

Breeze argues that building started in 142, the year in which Antoninus Pius was saluted as *imperator* for the British victories, and that the intention was to complete the work by 144. Delay would have been occasioned by the building of the secondary forts. Breeze suggests as much as three or four years 'if experience on Hadrian's Wall is a sound parallel'. The parallel is not sound, for virtually as many troops will have been available for the same number of smaller forts, built mainly of turf and timber rather than stone. We may suspect that Balmuilty at least was built before 142, for two inscriptions from the fort record the governor Lollius Urbicus (RIB 2191; 2192) who is not named on any other inscription from the Wall. He was in Britain by 139 (RIB 1147, Corbridge) and was known to the Augustan History as the governor responsible for the new conquest (SHA *Antoninus Pius* 5, 4): the normal tenure of a governorship at this period was three years, and Urbicus will surely have returned to Rome in time to participate in the celebration of the imperial acclamation in 142. As with Flavian Strathmore we may have one governor making plans and initiating construction, leaving his successor to complete the project: whether the successor of Urbicus was responsible for the change from stone to turf as well as the later decision to add extra forts, we shall probably never know.

There is no serious doubt that the first abandonment of the Antonine Wall occurred in the mid-150s, something like 10 years after the Wall was finished. The reasons for this are from clear. Evidence for destruction by hostile action of sites in Scotland or northern England is very restricted (Hanson & Maxwell 1983, 144–7). Evacuation by the governor without imperial authorization is most unlikely. Shortage of troops may be a factor, for the second Antonine occupation of Scotland seems to have involved considerably fewer troops than the first; but we have no evidence of troop withdrawals from Britain in the 150s. Abandonment of the Antonine Wall is usually associated with reoccupation of Hadrian's Wall under Iulius Verus in c 154–8 (RIB 1389 is specifically of 158), but current wisdom would have the Antonine Wall reoccupied within a very short time and finally abandoned in c 163/4 when the frontier returned to Hadrian's Wall (still in Period I B which began in 158). A final abandonment of the Antonine Wall in the early

years of Marcus Aurelius is, in itself, readily explicable. Marcus had no personal involvement in the project; a new reign was the normal time for a reappraisal of old policies and the outbreak of the Parthian War may well have induced the emperor to reduce his commitment in Britain.

That is not the problem. The real trouble is the overall uncertainty which has arisen from the attempt to write history from archaeological evidence. We seem to have Antonine Wall I ending c 155; Hadrian's Wall I B beginning in 158 or earlier; Antonine Wall II from c 158 or later to c 164; Hadrian's Wall I B resumed from c 164 and lasting until 180 (or 197 for traditionalists), to be followed by Hadrian's Wall II. This essentially archaeological interpretation, which endeavours to link itself to the sketchy and uncertain documentary evidence, may be correct – though it certainly cannot be proved so at present. There are, however, two historical questions which must be asked. Can it be explained adequately? Does it make sense? To both those questions the answer must be no.

To the question 'Is there a better solution available?' the answer must also be negative. The historical material alone is capable of producing more sensible solutions; but it has to be admitted that at present those solutions do not seem to be compatible with the archaeological evidence. We may be wrong to seek archaeological answers to historical questions when the strictly historical material fails us. We have all tried to do this, or to marry the two categories of evidence. It is possible to mate a lion with a tigress; but the resultant offspring does not resemble either parent at all closely, even though it may be a handsome and attractive animal. It is presumably also sterile.

REFERENCES

- Breeze, D J 1982 *The northern frontiers of Roman Britain*. London.
 Frere, S S & St Joseph, J K S 1983 *Roman Britain from the air*. Cambridge.
 Hanson, W S & Maxwell, G S 1983 *Rome's north-west frontier. The Antonine Wall*. Edinburgh.
 Jarrett, M G 1978 'The case of the redundant official', *Britannia*, 9 (1978), 289–92.
 Kennedy, D 1983 'C. Velius Rufus', *Britannia*, 14 (1983), 183–96.
 Maxwell, G S 1984 'New frontiers: the Roman fort at Doune and its possible significance', *Britannia*, 15 (1984), 217–24.
 Pitts, Lynn F & St Joseph, J K S 1985 *Inchtuthil. The Roman legionary fortress*. London.