Why did the Romans fail to conquer Scotland?

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'We have in common only with the Germanic tribes across the Rhine the distinction of not only stopping but defeating the Roman armies' (MacGregor 1987).

'The [Roman] frontiers are a symbol of abdication and failure' (Mann 1974a, 508).

INTRODUCTION

In the late summer of his seventh and final season (AD 83) the army of the Roman governor of Britain, Gnaeus Julius Agricola, defeated a larger Caledonian force at the battle of Mons Graupius. Agricola's son-in-law, the historian Tacitus, writing at the end of that century, was able to say (*Histories* 1, 2), *perdomita Britannia*, 'Britain was conquered'. However, he goes on to state, '*statim omissa*', 'it was immediately lost'. No permanent Roman forts of first century – or any other date – have been found beyond the Mounth, where the Highlands reach the sea at Stonehaven (illus 3), though Roman camps are known (illus 1), while archaeological evidence suggests that by about 90 all installations on and north of the Forth–Clyde line had been abandoned (Hartley 1972, 13; Hanson & Yeoman 1988, 14). Tacitus may have been indulging in hyperbole – not all Britain was lost, only the northern part – but nevertheless the Romans had failed to complete the conquest of the island, and had even withdrawn from territory which they had overrun[1].

The campaigns of Agricola, which from his second season (78 accepting the latest suggestions for the dating of his governorship, cf Birley 1981, 77; Campbell 1986) to his seventh (83) brought Roman arms from previously conquered Brigantia to victory at Mons Graupius, were the first of at least three occasions when Roman armies marched north to extend their empire. None appears to have lasted longer than about 25 years. Agricola's northern progress was part of a continuous advance of Roman arms which led, within a period of 15 years, to the absorption of Wales, northern England and southern Scotland into the empire. Mons Graupius was merely the latest victory in a series, though it seems to have been last in that series.

The second northern advance was under the Emperor Antoninus Pius in the early 140s. This was a much more limited operation, whch resulted in the abandonment of Hadrian's Wall and the establishment of a new frontier on the Forth–Clyde isthmus, the Antonine Wall (illus 6). These conquests appear to have been abandoned soon after the death of Antoninus Pius in 161.

The third occasion was in 208. The Emperor Septimius Severus travelled to Britain and, together with his son and co-emperor, Caracalla, waged war on the Caledones and Maeatae. His aim, according to the contemporary historian Cassius Dio (70.13.1) was to conquer the whole of the island, and he is recorded as reaching nearly the end of the island (70.13.3; cf illus 2). The northern tribes submitted but then rebelled and it was while Caracalla was putting down this revolt that his father

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died at York and the son abandoned the newly won territory, together with Roman forts, and returned to Rome (77.1.1). Thus ended the last serious attempt to complete the conquest of the whole island: subsequent campaigns, for example, under Constantius Chlorus in 305/6, seem to have been punitive expeditions rather than attempts to conquer (there may have been earlier punitive expeditions, for example, under Ulpius Marcellus in the early 180s).

Several reasons have been advanced for this failure by Rome. 'Failure' implies that it was the Roman intention to conquer the whole island. Rome saw her ability in terms of government and war (cf Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI, 851–3) and clearly saw her destiny in ruling the world. Augustus in his *Res gestae*, his own account of his achievements, claimed that he had achieved this aim: the fact that it was not yet completed was a matter of detail (the much quoted advice to his successor to retain the empire within its current boundaries is the comment of a tired and, after the reverses of AD 6 and 9, disillusioned old man; it does not reflect the actions of the younger Augustus). Tacitus thought along the same lines. In 98 he wrote that 'the conquest of Germany is taking such a long time' (*Germania* 37), after 'the final abandonment of the offensive against free Germany' (Schönberger 1969, 160). In the speech he put into Agricola's mouth before the battle of Mons Graupius (*Agricola* 33 and 34; cf 27), Tacitus said that the Roman aim was the conquest of the whole island and that aim was nearly achieved. The only other possible direct reference to such a plan, the Emperor Claudius's instructions to his new governor, Aulus Plautius, in 43, to conquer the rest (Dio 60.21.5) is so vague that it has
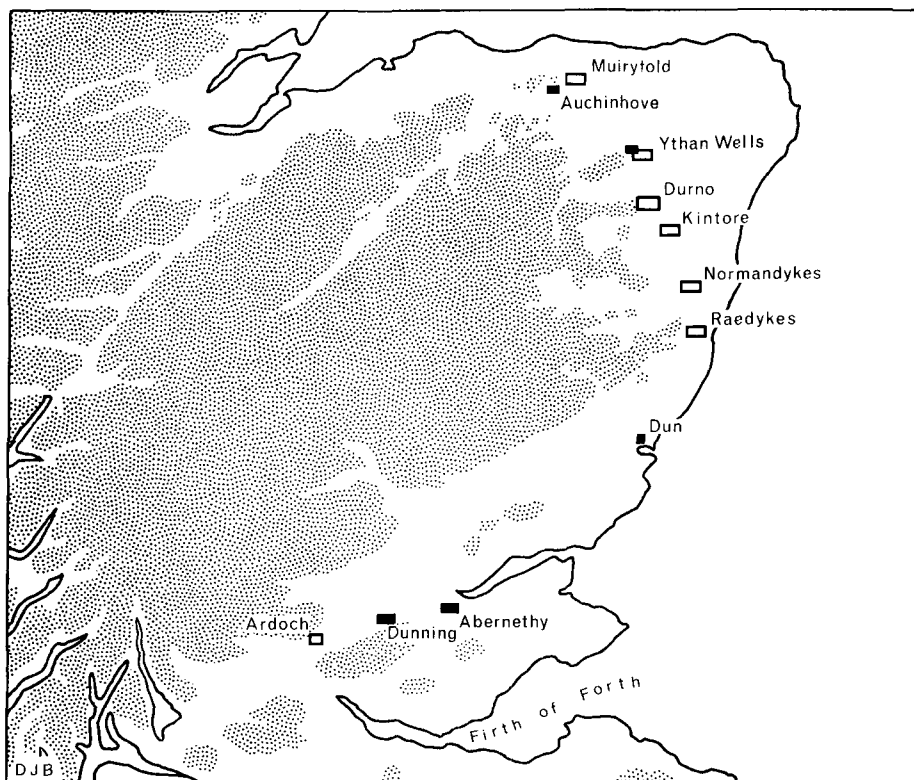
ILLUS 1   Roman camps north of the Forth considered to date to the Agricolan campaigns. For cautionary words on the date of the Raedykes–Muiryfold series see Maxwell 1980, 40, who argues that the available evidence could support a Severan date
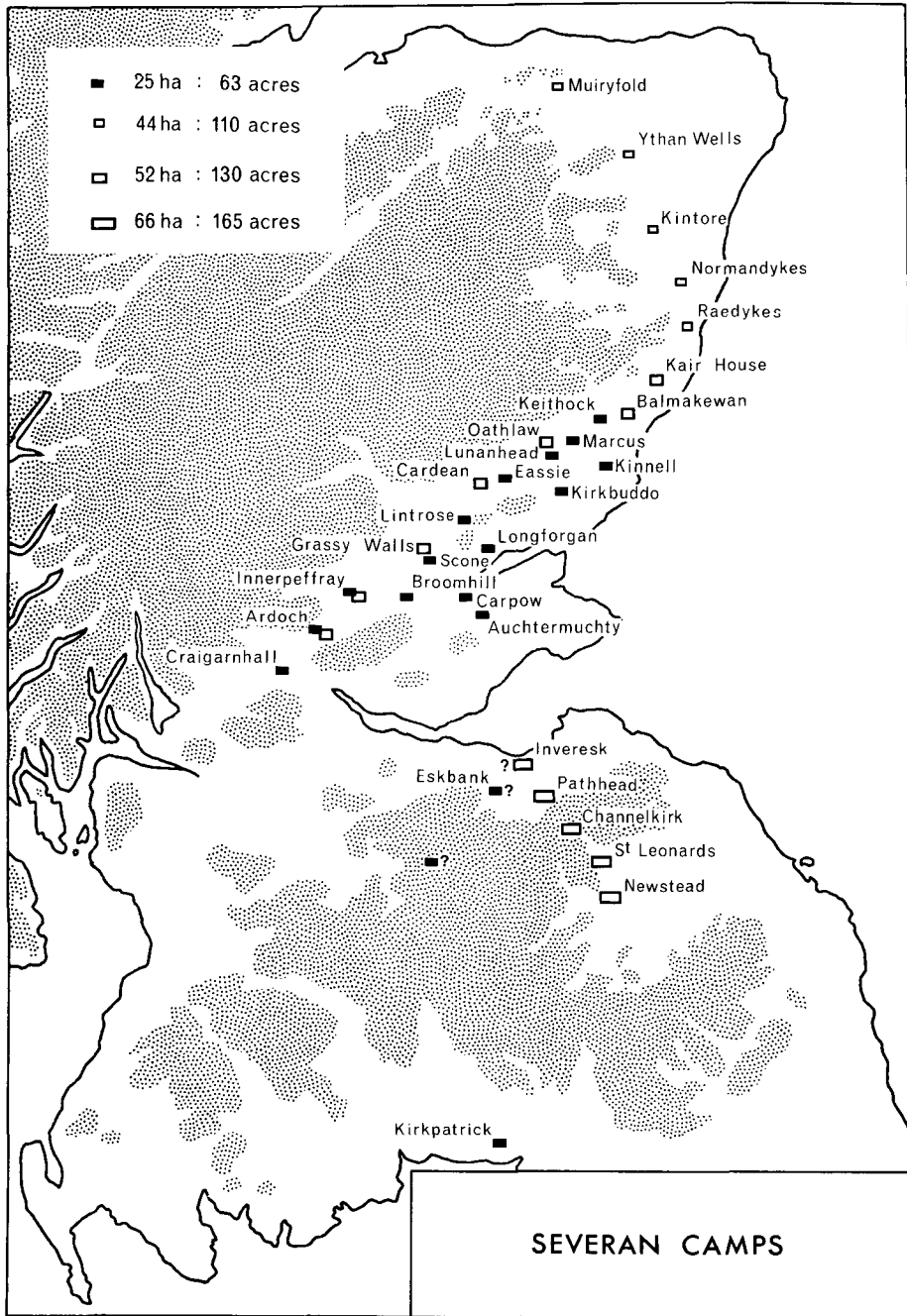
ILLUS 2 Roman camps in Scotland considered to date to the Severan campaigns. None of these camps is dated by artefacts, only by relationship to other camps. The Raedykes–Muiryfold series is included on this map as well as illus 1 as these camps may date to the third rather than the first century (Maxwell 1980, 40)

been variously interpreted as meaning 'the rest of Britain' or 'the rest of the area previously earmarked as the extent of the Roman province'.

There can thus be little doubt that Rome's long-term aim was the conquest of the whole island. Militarily, too, this would have made sense for the Romans knew that Britain was an island (eg Caesar, *BG* 5.20; Tacitus, *Agricola* 10), and completion of the conquest would presumably have allowed a substantial reduction in the size of the provincial army, as had happened in Spain once the conquest of the Iberian peninsula had been achieved (cf Mann 1974a, 529).

Various reasons have been offered for this failure and my purpose is to examine each in turn.

1   THE HIGHLANDERS WERE TOO WARLIKE TO BE CONQUERED

Accounts of the Highlanders appear in the pages of Tacitus (*Agricola* 11; 25–38) and the historians of the Severan campaigns, Dio (76. 12–13; 15) and Herodian (3.14). There is no suggestion here that they were *especially* fierce or warlike, though Dio (76.12.3) recorded that they stood their ground with great determination, and Herodian (3.14.8) that they were fearsome and dangerous fighters. Some of the statements made by these third-century historians appear to fall into the realms of folk tales rather than serious ethnographic comment, though this is quite usual: such authors, writing far from the events they describe, were not attempting an accurate ethnographical study, but merely using the information to add colour to their narratives. Further, care has to be taken in accepting the statements of the Roman historians at face value: it would suit their purpose to inflate the fighting qualities of the men they beat.

The northern tribes put aside their differences and, through treaties, joined all their forces into a single army in 82 (*Agricola* 29), and Dio (76.12.2) states that as their special pleasure lay in plundering they selected their bravest men to be their rulers. These were sensible arrangements rather than a demonstration of special military prowess, assuming that we are not here dealing with one of the stock phrases beloved of ancient authors (cf Tacitus, *Germania* 7: 'they choose their kings for their noble birth, their leaders for their valour'). In both the Agricolan and Severan campaigns the main strategy employed by the northern tribes was guerrilla warfare. This again was sensible, and had earlier been employed by other British tribes against the Roman army, as considerable advantages lay with lightly armed warriors fighting on their own ground where they could pick off stragglers, attack part of the column at will, slip away through known country, or lead the opposing army astray (as instanced by Dio 76.13.2). Furthermore, the odds were heavily weighted in Rome's favour in a set-piece battle, as was demonstrated, for example, at Mons Graupius. Why the Caledonian tribes engaged in a set-piece battle on that occasion is not clear. Certainly guerrilla warfare suffers from inherent disadvantages. It is not capable of indefinite extension, except in very favourable circumstances. Ruinous damage is being sustained to crops, cattle and houses while the Roman army remains in the field unopposed. While a civilization with a professional army can keep its force in the field – and so remain a threat – but decline battle, a barbarian army begins to melt away if nothing is done as groups return home to defend their own villages. Thus the cost of not fighting a set-piece battle is high. Richmond recognized many of these points when he proposed a site near the Pass of Grange for the battle: Calgacus felt that he had retreated as far as he could and needed to stop the invaders here so as 'to protect the coastal plain, not only because this was the last major tract of good land in Scotland, but also because it was the last area in which the combined strength of the Highland tribes could be congregated' (Ogilvie & Richmond 1967, 65). Possibly the Caledonians believed that they would win: perhaps they turned at bay, in desperation at their inability to stop the Romans by other means. The guerrilla tactics employed by the northern tribes during the Severan campaigns were not successful in preventing their capitulation and there is no evidence that their subsequent

revolt would have been successful. Such rebellions were not uncommon amongst recently conquered peoples and Rome was usually victorious in the end (the Varian disaster of AD 9 in Germany is unusual only in that there was not an immediate Roman military response). On no occasion were the guerrilla tactics used by either British or Gallic tribes successful. The nearest the northern tribes are recorded as coming close to defeating an invading Roman army was during Agricola's sixth campaign when the Ninth legion was attacked in its camp at night and was only saved by the timely intervention of the other two columns of the army moving to help from their own camps (*Agricola* 26).

On a number of occasions after the time of Agricola it is recorded that the northern tribes invaded the Roman province. About 180 they crossed the wall and massacred a general and his troops (Dio 72.8.2). In 208 Herodian (3.14.1) states that they were laying waste the frontier area, though it has been suggested that this comment was part of the excuse manufactured by Severus for intervention in Britain (Birley 1973, 187–8). In 367 the Picts were part of the conspiracy of barbarians who attacked the province (Ammianus Marcellinus 27.8; 28.3). On no occasion was the purpose of the invasion clear – the acquisition of booty is the usual assumption – but all were defeated by the Romans.

There is little that can be said of the fighting tactics of the Highland army. Our only surviving account is the battle of Mons Graupius. Here (and in the early third century) the northern tribes used chariots, by then an obsolete machine so far as other enemies of Rome were concerned. Battle tactics were of the simplest: a preliminary exchange of missiles, followed by hand-to-hand fighting, and then a forward push by the Caledonian army, which was stopped, and then reversed, by the Romans.

Some indirect evidence of the warlike nature of the Caledonians may come from the Roman side. From the invasion of Britain in 43 well into the third century a large army was maintained in Britain. The invasion force consisted of four legions and an uncertain number of auxiliary troops. If the balance of the force was equal then the army might have been 40000 strong. During the reign of Hadrian the size of the army can be estimated as three legions and 63 or 64 auxiliary units, the bulk of which, one legion and perhaps 55 auxiliary units lay on, or behind, the northern frontier (Breeze 1984, 268). During the peaceful conditions of the third century the strength of the army declined markedly (Mann 1974b, 38), the number of auxiliary units falling to perhaps 25, with 22 being stationed in the north. In the fourth century numbers rose again, perhaps to a total of 54 auxiliary units in the island – 37 in the north – an increase which coincides with the rise of the Picts. A further point can be made. Throughout the first and second centuries the leading generals of the day were sent to govern Britain (Birley 1981, 390–5). This suggests a need for their services in Britain, continuing well beyond the end of the conquest phase. We know of many occasions when there was trouble in Britain. While our sources often do not indicate where this trouble occurred, it is generally assumed that it lay on the northern frontier. In 68/9 the Brigantes threw out their pro-Roman queen, Cartimandua, thus providing the impetus and excuse for invasion, the start of a campaign which was to end a dozen years later at Mons Graupius. During these campaigns it is clear that, after the Brigantes, the main enemy in the north lay in Caledonia (compare *Agricola* 22 on the ease of conquest of the land up to the Tay and 25–27 on the more northerly tribes). At the end of the first century, or beginning of the second, two units appear to have won military honours in Britain: the most obvious place for military action was the northern frontier (Breeze & Dobson 1987, 17). At the beginning of the reign of Hadrian it is stated that 'the Britons could not be kept under Roman control' (HA *Hadrian* 5.2; cf also Fronto, *Letter to Marcus on the Parthian War*, 2, recording the killing of many soldiers in Britain under Hadrian). Antoninus Pius commenced his reign with the invasion of southern Scotland (HA *Antoninus Pius* 5.4), though it is not clear who the enemy were (Pausanius, *Description of Greece* 8.43.4, presumably referring to this event, states that it was the Brigantes, seemingly a mistake, which has excited much scholarly controversy, eg Hind 1977). The start of the

next reign in 161 saw 'war threatening in Britain' (HA, *Marcus* 8.7), and under Commodus in the early 180s:

> 'the tribes in the island crossed the wall which divided them from the Roman legions, did a great deal of damage, and cut down a general and his troops' (Dio 72.8.1).

In 197

> 'the Caledonians instead of honouring their promises had prepared to defend the Maeatae, and Severus at that time was concentrating on the Parthian war, so Lupus [governor of Britain] had no choice but to buy peace from the Maeatae for a considerable sum of money, recovering a few captives' (Dio 75.5.4).

Ten years later the Romans were winning wars in Britain (Dio 76.10.6), while from 209 to 211 Severus waged war in Caledonia (Dio 76.13). On each occasion the enemy, when mentioned, were the tribes of Caledonia. There may be a hint that successive biographers tried to paint a dark picture of the condition of the empire inherited by the subject of their treatises (Breeze & Dobson 1987, 81), but the continuing dispatch of so many able generals to Britain emphasizes the significance which the emperor attached to the northern frontier in Britain.

The large army and the military governors, however, may reflect only that the tribes beyond the frontier were troublesome – not unconquerable. The Welsh tribes had caused the Romans much anguish, including the near massacre of an auxiliary unit (Tacitus, *Annals* 12, 37), before effective measures were taken, namely conquest. What had hitherto been lacking was the Roman will to undertake conquest. The situation on the northern frontier may have been directly comparable. Thus the size of the army may have been a consequence of the failure to conquer the whole island, the failure relating to factors other than the nature of the enemy. It may also have reflected the fact that Britain was an island and that rapid reinforcement of this army was difficult (I owe this suggestion to Dr B Dobson). The military governors may in turn spring from presence of a large army: such an army demanded a commander of appropriate rank.

Thus no positive evidence can be adduced that the Caledonians were particularly warlike, nor indeed that they were ever successful in their wars with Rome. Until the end of Roman Britain the provincial army was successful both in defeating each invasion of the empire and in preventing the Picts from conquering the tribes of the Southern Uplands or settling in the immediate vicinity of the frontier.

2   THE HIGHLANDS WERE TOO DAUNTING A PROSPECT FOR THE ROMANS TO CONQUER

It is certainly true that we know of no Roman installations, whether temporary camps or permanent forts, within the Highlands (the suggested Roman context for the sites at Easter Galcantray and Thoms Hill – Daniels 1986 and Jones 1986 – fails to convince; most of the evidence from the former site would better sit within a medieval context while there appears to be no dating evidence for the latter). In the 80s a series of forts was established along the edge of the Highlands, each located at, or opposite, the mouth of a glen (illus 3). Various interpretations of the functions of these forts have been offered. They marked the boundary of the empire, their purpose being to prevent enemies advancing down the glens to attack the Roman province (Ogilvie & Richmond, 1967, 67); they were the springboards for a Roman advance up the glens, an advance which never occurred (Mann 1968); they were to prevent new provincials from fleeing the empire (Hind 1983, 376–7). It is doubtful if we will ever be sure of the correct answer. Certainly Roman forts were used in other locations for at least the first two functions. In 62 Corbulo placed forts to guard routes into Syria which might be used by
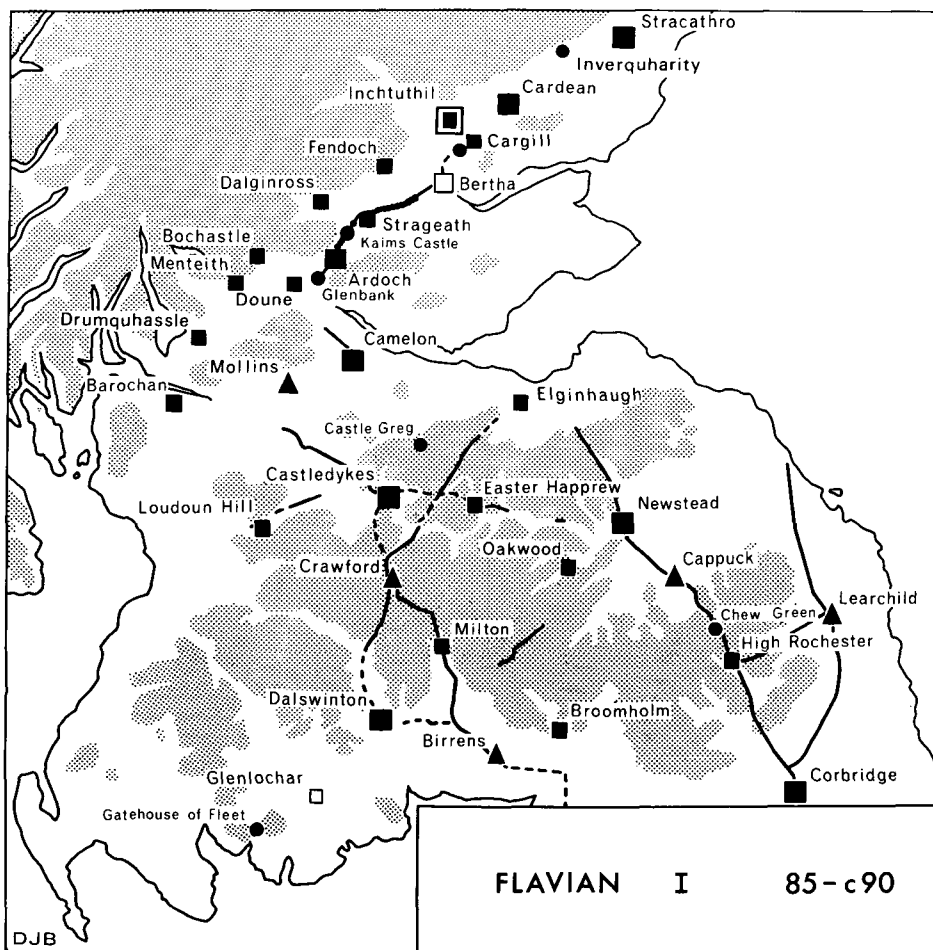
ILLUS 3 Roman forts north of the Tyne–Solway isthmus considered to date to the governorship of Agricola and his successor. The legionary base at Inchtuthil is marked by a double square; forts of 6 acres+ (2·4 ha) by large squares; normal forts by smaller squares; small forts by triangles; fortlets by large circles; the Gask frontier watch-towers by small circles

the enemy (Tacitus, *Annals* 15, 3) while legionary fortresses and main auxiliary forts on the middle Danube in the first century AD were placed on routes into and out of the empire (Maxfield 1987, 174–5). In the campaigns of the late first century BC the Roman armies advanced into Germany along the river valleys which led east and north from the main bases on the Rhine at Xanten and Mainz (*ibid*, 143). In Wales the forts established in the river valleys in the 50s and 60s served as springboards for the advances up those valleys in the 70s, though here we may be witnessing a change in role. Though there are many examples of forts being used to guard routes, however, there are no references known to me, at least in literary sources, to forts being placed to prevent people fleeing the empire.

As Roman forts were used in different ways it is more difficult to determine the function of the Highland-line forts. Furthermore, as the fortress at Inchtuthil was abandoned uncompleted (Pitts & St Joseph 1985, 279), other elements of the new dispositions may not have been finished – or even started. Such elements *may* have included forts further up the glens. We are thus possibly not only

trying to put together a jigsaw from which many pieces have been lost over the last 1900 years, but a jigsaw which may never have been finished.

There are both hints that the Highland line forts were used to control movement down the glens and that they were possibly to be but the first stage of an advance up the glens. In the first place, there was a timber tower on a knoll a little distance up the glen from the fort at Fendoch. Perhaps the best explanation for the function of this tower is that it was to help provide observation by soldiers concerned with movement down the glen, rather than, say, signalling to soldiers at a fort further up the glen.

In the second, the position of Inchtuthil north of the river Tay suggests a forward, offensive, role and that therefore there would have been more than the three forts currently known beyond it; ie the forward position of Inchtuthil argues for the proposed existence of more forts to its north than are known at present. These forts, however, could have lain in north-east Scotland beyond the Mounth, where the Grampian Mountains reach the sea near Stonehaven, rather than in the Highlands.

A major problem in interpreting the Highland line forts as blocking the mouths of the glens is that very little settlement is known up any of the glens (interestingly Inchtuthil sits opposite the mouth of the Tay glen up which lie the only known substantial areas of settlement within the Highlands (Rivet 1966, end map): this may explain the placing of the fortress at this particular point). The forts do not appear to be protecting the province from people living immediately beyond the empire, though they could be guarding against the glens being used as routes by invaders from beyond. It might be argued that the Romans would not know that few people lived up the glens, but perhaps that would be to underestimate Roman military intelligence (Breeze 1987). Possibly a more convincing argument would be that the Romans knew that few people lived up the glens and therefore did not intend to occupy the Highlands, merely placing their forts at the mouths of the glens as precautionary measures. It would certainly be rash to assume that the barbarians would necessarily use a glen as an invasion route. In his campaigns of 1648 Montrose marched along glens, but also across mountains or along ridges. Any one of the glen forts would have had little role to play in the event of a major invasion – in 1745 the Hanoverian forts were by-passed by the Jacobite army as it launched itself out of the Highlands. Rather, the forts in the glen mouths are perhaps more concerned with low intensity threats – raiding and the like – if defensive and not offensive in purpose. The question of whether the Romans intended to occupy the Highlands following their victory at Mons Graupius must remain open.

If the Romans had envisaged planting forts within the Highlands their network might not have been dissimilar from that adopted in the 18th century by the Hanoverians. Using pre-existing castles outside the Highlands main forts were constructed at nodal points within the massif. These lay at Inverness (Fort George), Fort Augustus and Fort William, while in between lay smaller garrison posts – or fortlets – all linked by a network of roads. Fort Augustus appears to have been built for an infantry battalion 800 strong, Fort William for a force 1200 strong made up of private regiments (not totally unlike the early Roman auxilia), while Fort George was designed for two infantry battalions together with an artillery unit (MacIvor 1983, 8). The 18th-century infantry battalion was close in size to the second-century milliary regiment. The size of the force based at each of these three forts was rather larger than that at a normal Roman auxiliary fort, but nevertheless is comparable to the size of establishments at larger forts such as Newstead. The garrison of one of the smaller posts, Ruthven Barracks, 120 men (Stell 1983), was similar to that of a Roman fortlet, while that of another, Corgarff Castle, was 45 (MacIvor 1986), perhaps the garrison of a smaller fortlet. Furthermore, it may be considered that there is some similarity between the relative nature of the forces on the two occasions, a better trained and disciplined standing army facing native tribes or clans. Certainly the Hanoverians demonstrated that the Highlands were not unconquerable by a better trained and disciplined standing

army (though they had the psychological advantage of being the legitimate government). Equally, the Jacobite uprisings demonstrate that these forts and barracks could be ignored by a 'barbarian' army. It was only after the Jacobites were being driven back into the Highlands in 1746 that they captured most of these forts, thereby demonstrating the limited effect of forts in hindering the movement of a mobile force.
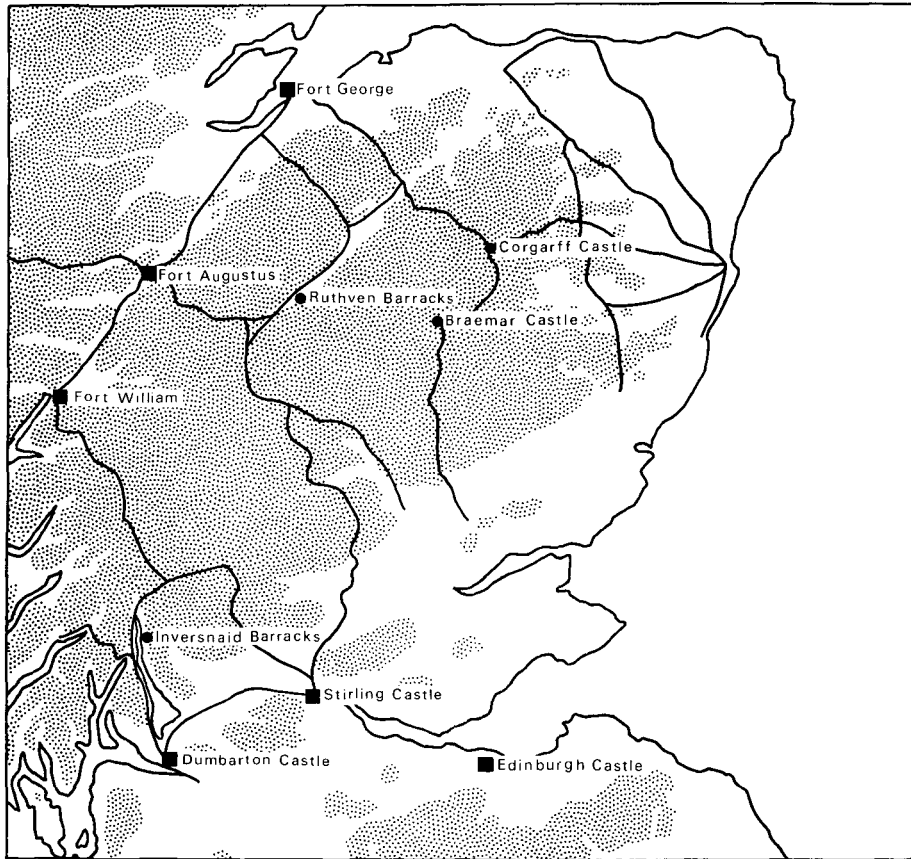
ILLUS 4   Forts and military roads in the Highlands in the late 18th century. The map indicates the fortifications and roads in existence in the years following the collapse of the Jacobite uprising of 1745/6. Large bases ('forts') are indicated by squares, smaller posts ('fortlets') by circles

Finally, we may note that the Highlands of Scotland are not as extensive as the mountain ranges of Yugoslavia, eastern Turkey or the Alps, nor do they contain mountains as high as in those areas and in many other parts of the Roman empire including Spain, Dacia and Italy, though climatic factors render such comparisons difficult. Furthermore, the Highlands would have been more densely forested than today, which would have made communications more difficult. Nevertheless it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Roman army, which was not beaten by any other terrain, could have dealt with the Scottish Highlands if it had wished.

3 IT WAS NOT WORTHWHILE ECONOMICALLY FOR ROME TO BRING SCOTLAND INTO HER EMPIRE

Few Roman writers discussed economics or advanced financial reasons for Roman imperial actions. There are, however, some references to Britain. Strabo, writing in the time of Augustus, offered a reason (2, 5, 8) for not incorporating Britain into the empire:

> 'Although the Romans could have possessed Britain, they scorned to do so, for they saw that there was nothing at all to fear from Britain, since they are not strong enough to cross over and attack us. No corresponding advantages would arise by taking over and holding the country. For at present more seems to accrue from the customs duties on their commerce than direct taxation could supply, if we deduct the cost of maintaining an army to garrison the island and collect the tribute. The unprofitableness of an occupation would be still more marked in the case of other islands near Britain.' (Translation by Mann and Penman.)

Appian, a former *advocatus fisci* (financial secretary to the emperor) and imperial procurator, writing in the mid-second century, remarked that:

> 'the Romans have penetrated beyond the northern ocean to Britain, an island larger than a considerable continent. They rule the most important part of it – more than half – and have no need of the rest; in fact the part they have brings them in little money.' (Translation by Mann and Penman.)

Elsewhere he states (*Proem*, 7) that:

> 'possessing the best part of the earth and sea they have, on the whole, aimed to preserve their empire by the exercise of prudence, rather than to extend their sway indefinitely over poverty-stricken and profitless tribes of barbarians, some of whom I have seen at Rome offering themselves, by their ambassadors, as its subjects, but the emperor would not accept them because they would be of no use to him. They give kings to a great many other nations whom they do not wish to have under their own government. On some of the subject nations they spend more than they receive from them, deeming it dishonourable to give them up even though they are costly. They surround the empire with great armies and they garrison the whole stretch of land and sea like a single stronghold.' (Translation by H White.)

The difficulty lies in knowing whether Strabo and Appian are offering reasons or justifications for not conquering more. The same doubt may be extended to Aelius Aristides writing about the same time as Appian (*Oration* 80–84), who claimed that Rome ruled all that was worth having. Some support for the view that these comments were justifying policy may be gained from the facility with which they might be abandoned. A generation after Strabo justified the policy of non-intervention in Britain, Claudius invaded the island because, as Suetonius put it (17.1):

> 'he sought the honour of a real triumph and chose Britain as the best field in which to seek this, for no-one had attempted an invasion since the time of Julius Caesar, and the island at this time was in a turmoil because certain refugees had not been returned to the island.' (Translation by Mann and Penman.)

On the other hand, the stated reason for doing or not doing something might have been the policy at that time: policies do change. We may note, however, that economic arguments tend to be advanced as reasons why conquest was not undertaken; economic reasons, on the other hand are not offered when conquest was carried forward, which may suggest that the former are excuses rather than reasons. In addition, the idea of a war undertaken for commercial reasons seems to have been foreign to the Roman empire.

Whether Appian's comments were the basis for the imperial policy for north Britain or justification for non-completion of the conquest of the island it can at least be admitted that he was

correct and that further territories gained in Britain would have brought the empire no economic advantage, with perhaps the exception of the negative advantage that it would subsequently have been possible to reduce the size of the army in the island – assuming that the Romans did not consider unconquered Ireland a threat which required a continuing military presence in Britain.

4   THE NATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE IN NORTH BRITAIN WAS INSUFFICIENTLY URBANIZED TO SUPPORT THE FOOD SUPPLY FOR THE ROMAN ARMY AND THE IMPOSED ROMAN ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

Groenman-van Waateringe (1980, 1041) has argued that

'it is now possible to conclude that a successful permanent Roman occupation was only possible in those regions where the Romans were confronted with a well-organised proto-urban or urban structure, which they could utilise for the supply of their armies and upon which they were able to project gradually their social and administrative system. For its food supply the Roman army was heavily dependent on pre-existent central places, where local produce was concentrated and where a market economy with long distance trading networks was fully functional.'

Southern Britain, Professor Groenman argues, possessed the necessary conditions for a successful Roman occupation: 'the production of agricultural surplus, . . . and a social structure capable of concentrating that surplus in one place and distributing it by means of trade'. Evidence for both, Professor Groenman suggests, can be seen in the growth of major hillforts in the second half of the first millennium BC and the discovery within certain of these of very large numbers of storage pits and rows of granaries. These hillforts, it is proposed, served extensive territories. In the last century BC and the first AD even larger units appeared and the territories which these controlled formed the bases of the subsequent Roman *civitates*. By implication these conditions did not occur in northern Britain; hence the lack of a successful permanent occupation.

It should be emphasized that this argument is based essentially on the *interpretation* of archaeological evidence, not on contemporary statements or otherwise ascertainable facts. It is possible – indeed probable – that the interpretation will change, and indeed some would argue that the evidence for pre-conquest urbanization has been overplayed (Ralston pers comm). Two further points can be made about the hypothesis. Firstly, it is arguable whether the presence of a proto-urban or urban society has to be linked to the existence of a market economy. Secondly, in her analysis Professor Groenman compared southern Britain and northern Holland, not two adjoining areas.

This is a weakness of the argument. It would be better to compare two adjacent areas. It can be accepted that in southern England conditions were conducive to its absorption into the empire. But why did the province extend beyond that area and why did the expansion stop where it did? In order to consider Professor Groenman's hypothesis further – and try to answer these questions – it would be worth-while trying to compare southern England with northern Britain. Archaeological research into the Iron Age in northern Britain is not so far advanced as in the southern part of the island. Nevertheless some points may be made.

There was in existence in northern Britain at the time of the Roman conquest a political organization based on tribes (eg Tacitus, *Agricola* 12 and 29). Ptolemy (*Geography* II, 3, 5–9) not only recorded their names and approximate locations but also places within them: some of those places are possibly native settlements, rather than Roman forts (Mann & Breeze 1987, 87). These tribes were sufficiently politically advanced to be able to put aside their differences and unite against a common foe (*Agricola* 29). Forts (*oppida* may be too strong) existed in northern Britain and the effort required to construct these implies surplus agricultural production.

The existence of a settlement hierarchy topped by major hillforts, such as Traprain Law and Eildon Hill North, may suggest the development of proto-urban societies. These societies were certainly not as advanced as those elsewhere in Britain – they did not, for example, possess a coinage, while central storage depots have not been found (nor have they yet been recognized archaeologically in many continental *oppida*) – but it may be argued that, other factors being equal (which they were not), Rome could have utilized the existing proto-urban society and the agricultural surplus to support their own administrative structure and army. In any case there is no reason why the agricultural surpluses of southern Britain could not have been transported to northern Britain (cf Ammianus Marcellinus 18.2.3 for the regular trans-shipment of corn from Britain in the fourth century). While the army was enjoined to obtain its supplies locally (Cod Theod VII, 4, 15; XI, 1, 21; XI, 1, 22), many goods were transported over considerable distances to the army in northern Britain (cf Breeze 1984) and it was both possible and perhaps practicable for corn to have been one of their number.

An important question concerning the position of the provincial boundary in Britain is, why did it lie precisely where it did? The frontier lay well beyond the territories of the more advanced tribes discussed by Professor Groenman, with no clear distinction being identifiable between the nature of the tribes immediately within the province and those immediately beyond. Whittaker (1983, 111–12) has argued that 'Roman frontiers frequently cut through zones of relative homogeneity'. Thus to find the British frontier lying within the broad cultural zone which stretched, roughly, from the Humber–Mersey line to the Highlands of Scotland is perhaps not surprising. Whittaker has also argued (1983, 113) that

> 'frontiers are really regions which are marginal because they are mixed both socially and economically, representing as they do the change over from intensive to extensive production, where the capacity to collect food surpluses is offset by social systems that are incapable of producing these surpluses. They are necessarily zones because no state ever arrives at the optimum balance between its range of conquest (ie it military capacity) and the economy of its rule (ie where the military expenditure is no longer paid for by tax returns); and because the turn-over from economic viability to economic liability is necessarily gradual, unperceived and stable'.

In Britain he finds support for his view through the differences detected by Professor G D B Jones in the density and style of habitation sites south and north of the Solway (Jones 1979). It should be noted, however, that these sites are revealed through aerial photography and are undated, while it is perhaps difficult to determine cause and effect here[3].

The location of the northern frontier in Britain can be explained in both geographical and political terms. The Tyne–Solway and the Forth–Clyde isthmuses form two natural halting-places within the island if complete conquest is not being sought. Agricola in his fourth season considered the latter possibility. But for most of the 366 years life of Roman Britain the frontier lay on the Tyne–Solway isthmus. The establishment of the Brigantes as a client state of Rome in the aftermath of the invasion of 43 (Hanson & Campbell 1986, 73) brought the edge of the empire to the northern boundary of that tribe, which appears to have lain on, or close to, that isthmus, for the Romans regarded client states as part of their empire (Suetonius, *Augustus* 48). Thus, from the Roman point-of-view, the northern frontier of the empire in Britain may be considered to have lain on the Tyne–Solway isthmus from the settlement following the invasion through to the very end of Roman Britain, with the exception of 79 to about 105, 142 to about 165 and 209 to 211. Viewed against the timescale of 366 years these three episodes may be seen as aberrations, but more importantly the frontier can be seen to have followed a political line which was also a convenient geographical boundary. Within the context of Professor Groenman's hypothesis, the Brigantes may not have been ideal material for absorption in the empire but as they had to all intents and purposes been Roman since 43, or soon

after, subsequent abandonment of their territory might have been seen as too great a loss of face, while also leaving the province with a less satisfactory northern boundary. Whatever the correct explanation this consideration of local geographical and political factors leads on to consideration of both aspects within the empire as a whole.

5 THE POLITICAL NATURE OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND THE GEOGRAPHICAL ISOLATION OF BRITAIN COMBINED WITH EVENTS ELSEWHERE PREVENTED THE CONQUEST OF THE ISLAND

An important consideration in understanding the nature of the expansion of the Roman empire (as opposed to the republic) was that the empire was a military dictatorship. The emperor decided when, where and how the empire was to expand, or not, as the case might be. The invasion of Britain by Claudius was because he needed a triumph, according to the Roman writer Suetonius (17.1). There is no reason to disbelieve this statement. Claudius became emperor in most unprepossessing circumstances, being pulled from behind a curtain and proclaimed by rioting soldiers following the murder of his nephew Caligula. He required military prestige to bolster his position and he chose Britain to achieve that end, not only expanding the empire but conquering the ocean: Julius Caesar had received a greater triumph for crossing the ocean and subduing south-eastern England than he did for conquering the three parts of Gaul. Modern history is full of military dictators – and other leaders – striving to bolster their domestic position by a successful foreign adventure. There is no need to invent any other reason for the conquest of Britain, such as the desire to acquire control of British metals (though these were certainly exploited soon after the conquest: a different matter altogether). Indeed such modern reasons run directly counter to Strabo who remarked (2.5.8) that Rome seemed to receive more in customs dues than she would through direct taxation minus the costs of maintaining an army on the island and collecting the tax. Four years after the invasion of southern Britain, for which he earned a triumph and the erection of a triumphal arch in Rome, Claudius ordered the withdrawal of the governor Domitius Corbulo across the Rhine and the abandonment of Roman forts in the territory of the Chauci (Tacitus, *Annals* 11.19). Corbulo remarked wryly that earlier commanders were fortunate.

Millar (1983, 8–9) has argued that 'Imperial "policy" could often consist of allowing legati to follow their own presumptions, until external factors, a major crisis or their own excessive activity, compelled intervention'. The case cannot be proved, as Millar admits, and the available evidence could be alternatively interpreted, as indeed it has been (Frere 1987, 91; Breeze & Dobson 1976, 125). Several examples survive of governors stopping campaigning because the emperor had died, for example, Vitellius returning to base on the death of Tiberius having lost his authority for action, and Vespasian ceasing military operations against the Jewish *rebels* on the death of Nero (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.1; *The Jewish War* 4, 498). Examples also survive of emperors issuing instructions to governors during their terms of office. There is, however, a lack of evidence for the *mandata*, the instruction given to a governor on his taking office, containing specific, as opposed to general, instructions. If the *mandata* did not contain such instructions Millar argues that it must be concluded that there was no 'Imperial' policy for the new governor's province, or that the emperor will have subsequently issued orders – such as survive – perhaps as a result of the governor seeking advice. The former is perfectly possible: the policy in fact would have been maintenance of the status quo. Several requests for instructions from a governor to an emperor are known, as are reports from governors to emperors, for example, from Agricola to Domitian after Mons Graupius (*Agricola* 39). Millar points out that 'nothing is said by *Tacitus* about *mandata* from Vespasian to Agricola, or about subsequent instructions from him, Titus or Domitian, or about consultation of them by Agricola'. But

Tacitus is hardly likely to have offered any comment which might have detracted from the achievements of his father-in-law, Agricola, who should be allowed the glory of extending the empire. Thus Tacitus's silence is not surprising, and the silence of the *Agricola* can have no bearing on whether or not governors were issued with instructions at the beginning of their appointments.

A second example is Domitius Corbulo, who was pulled back from across the Rhine by Claudius in 47 (Tacitus, *Annals* 11, 14–19). Corbulo had crossed the river to deal with the Chauci who had raided his province following the death of his predecessor. During the course of these operations he finally quietened the neighbouring Frisians after 20 years of disturbance, and after taking hostages built a fort in their territory. The Roman-inspired assassination of the Chauci leader led to revolt and Claudius forbade further aggression against the Germans and ordered the withdrawal of all troops to the west of the Rhine. The problems lie in knowing Claudius's reasons for his instructions and the precise point at which Corbulo exceeded his authority.

One expansion of the empire in Britain was explicitly at the behest of the emperor: the advance of Lollius Urbicus in the 140s was on the specific instructions of the emperor Antoninus Pius (HA, *Antoninus Pius* 5, 4; *Pan*, VIII, 14.2).

Although there is no positive evidence that Agricola acted on instructions from his emperors, there is circumstantial evidence. His governorship was not one progressive advance of Roman arms, but a go-stop-go movement. After a decade of continuous expansion, under three different governors, in his fourth year as governor of Britain – 80 – Agricola placed a chain of garrisons across the Forth–Clyde isthmus and Tacitus remarks that 'if the valour of the Roman army and the glory of the Roman name had allowed it, a stopping place would have been found within Britain' (*Agricola* 23). This is the first statement that a frontier might have been established within the island rather than at the sea-shore. This year was followed by a season of exploration and Agricola (*Agricola* 24) considered the practicalities – and *casus belli* – of an invasion of Ireland: possibly this was being considered as an alternative (or as an addition) to a move north since that area had apparently been closed to Roman arms by the decision of the previous year. In 82, however, that decision was reversed and Roman armies crossed the Forth and marched into Caledonia. The halt on the Forth–Clyde isthmus in 80 and 81 coincides with the reign of Titus (see table 1). Vespasian died on 23 June 79. There was thus no time for a change in policy that year: 80 was the first year that Titus's actions could be recognized. He died on 13 September 81 and thus 82 was the first season that Domitian could act. Both 80 and 82 mark changes in policy: stop and go. 82 in fact saw Roman armies advancing in Germany and Britain. It is difficult not to indulge in amateur psychology and suggest that Titus, full of military honours, ordered the halt in Britain, presumably on the advice of Agricola who had previously reconnoitred the land beyond, at least as far as the Tay (*Agricola* 22), and that Domitian, long kept in the shadows and prevented from acquiring military experience or honours, instructed his

TABLE 1
Agricola's governorship

Season	Date*	Emperor	Agricola's area of operation
1	77	Vespasian	North Wales
2	78	Vespasian	North Britain?
3	79	Vespasian died 23 June Titus succeeds	Southern Scotland, up to Tay
4	80	Titus	Garrisons Forth–Clyde Isthmus
5	81	Titus died 13 September Domitian succeeds	Western Coast
6	82	Domitian	Moves across the Forth
7	83	Domitian	North of the Forth

*The earlier date of Agricola's governorship is accepted.

armies to advance. Whatever the reason these changes seem to relate closely to changes in emperor, and strongly suggest imperial control of Agricola's activities, though one – or all three – may have been acting on the advice of the man on the spot, Agricola himself (the halt on the Forth–Clyde line followed reconnaissance as far north as the Tay – if the usual emendation is accepted – when presumably the Highlands will have been seen: it may be that Agricola, acting perhaps on the evidence of his own eyes, more certainly on military intelligence, considered that northern Scotland was not worth conquering).

There is indeed a broad hint in the description of the events of the fourth season (80) that some matters were not Agricola's to decide. Tacitus's circumspect language (see above) reveals that Agricola was not responsible for one or both of the decisions referred to here – the halt on the Forth–Clyde isthmus and the subsequent advance. It was hardly the army's decision, as Tacitus tries to imply: it could only be the emperor who decided what 'the glory of the Roman name' allowed. Knowledge of the person who took the decision to move forward or not – emperor or governor – is significant in determining why Scotland remained unconquered: the available evidence seems to suggest that the emperor was the person who took such decisions.

To turn from this question and Agricola's advance and consider later events. Following the victory at Mons Graupius a legion was placed at Inchtuthil and support was provided in the form of auxiliary units. Before the legionary fortress was finished, however, it was abandoned. The reason usually accepted for this is the withdrawal of one legion, II Adiutrix, from the island, which may have
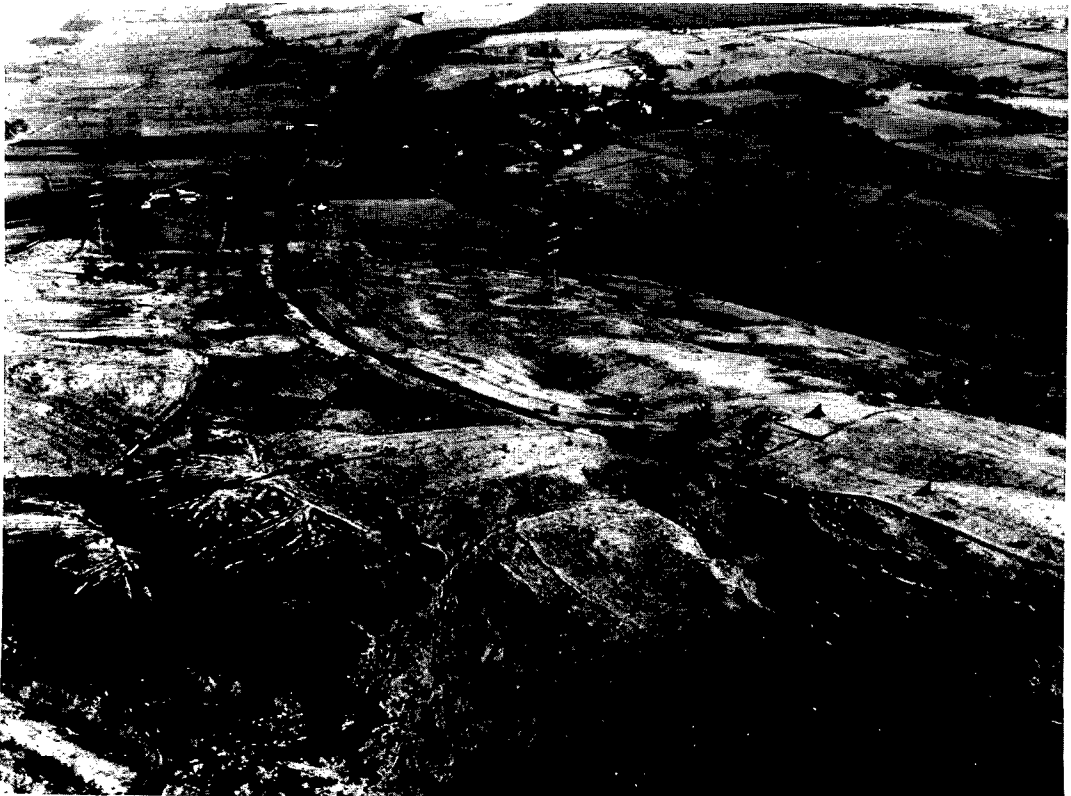

ILLUS 5   The Antonine Wall crossing Croy Hill looking east. The ditch enters the photograph towards bottom right and leaves centre top (arrowed). The sites of the primary fortlet (right) and secondary fort (under the abandoned steading) are also arrowed[2]. Photo M Brooks *Crown Copyright*

occurred as early as the winter of 85/86. The legion was withdrawn in order to support the Danubian army, severely mauled by the Dacians in 85 and again in 86: II Adiutrix was certainly on the Danube by 93. Thus the failure to follow up the victory at Mons Graupius was due not to problems on the spot, but to an emergency elsewhere which led to the withdrawal of troops from Britain and the consequent abandonment of territory.

This introduces a further, and most important, factor: the location of Britain on the very edge of the empire. Progress in Britain might be affected by events on the more important European or Eastern frontiers. Unlike there, possession of Britain was not vital to the empire's survival and led nowhere: its continuing possession, as Dr Dobson has suggested to me, may reflect only the Roman will to retain what had been won. (The isolation of Britain must in turn have had its effect on the more detailed progress of events, bearing in mind the speed of communications at the time (cf Millar 1982, 9–10); governors must have had considerable freedom of action in view of the fact that it might have taken as long as two months for a message sent from Britain to Rome to return with an answer.)

Various reasons have been advanced for the invasion of Scotland under Antoninus Pius. These include unsettled conditions in the Lowlands (Steer 1964, 19–21), the suggestion that Hadrian's Wall had been built in the wrong place and that as the main enemy lay north of the Forth the frontier was moved to the more appropriate geographical line, the Forth–Clyde isthmus (Gillam 1958, 66–7), the necessity for Antoninus Pius to throw a sop to his generals who had been kept on a tight reign by Hadrian (Birley 1974), and the necessity for Antoninus Pius to win a triumph (Breeze 1976), while the possibility of economic gains from bringing the good farmland of the Lothians into the empire has not been ruled out (Hanson & Maxwell 1986, 68–9). The suggestion that the reason for the advance in Britain lay not in the island, where any trouble on the northern frontier would have been dealt with by the army without any requirement to move the frontier, but in Rome, came from Professor Anthony Birley. He pointed to the difficulties of the position of Antoninus Pius on his accession. He was not Hadrian's first choice as his successor, nor was he a military man. Birley proposed that the advance into Scotland was related to these two points and this military adventure was a sop thrown to the imperial marshals, kept largely inactive during the 20 years of Hadrian's reign. However, this single campaign would only have brought glory to one general. Moreover, Fronto was careful to point out that the invasion of Scotland was controlled by Pius himself (*Pan*, VIII, 14.2), while the successful conclusion of the campaign brought the emperor the only acclamation as *imperator* (conqueror) that he was to take during the 23 years of his reign, apart from that which he took on his accession. Thus the invasion may indeed be related to Pius's own position, but its purpose was surely to provide him with a triumph – military prestige – so important to an emperor, as had been appreciated by Claudius 100 years before (cf Millar 1982, 12–13). One further point may add some support to this hypothesis. The aim of the invasion of Scotland at this time was not to complete the conquest of the whole island. It was a much more limited operation, and did not even encompass the reconquest of the provincial territory of 60 years before, still less the completion of the conquest of the rest of the island (compare illus 3 & 6). It would appear that a definitive military solution to the problem of the northern frontier was not being sought. Interestingly these new conquests all appear to have been abandoned within a short time of the death of Antoninus Pius. The emperor died in September 161. Ceramic evidence is thought to point to the mid 160s as the date of abandonment, while building inscriptions of Calpurnius Agricola in northern England indicate that the decision was being implemented during his governorship, probably 162–6. It seems not impossible that the death of the initiator of this extension of the empire had removed any necessity to retain the new conquests, though it remains possible that other factors, such as the need to withdraw troops from Britain in the face of invasion of the eastern provinces, were equally, or more, significant.

If the reasons for the invasion of Scotland under Antoninus Pius and the withdrawal under his
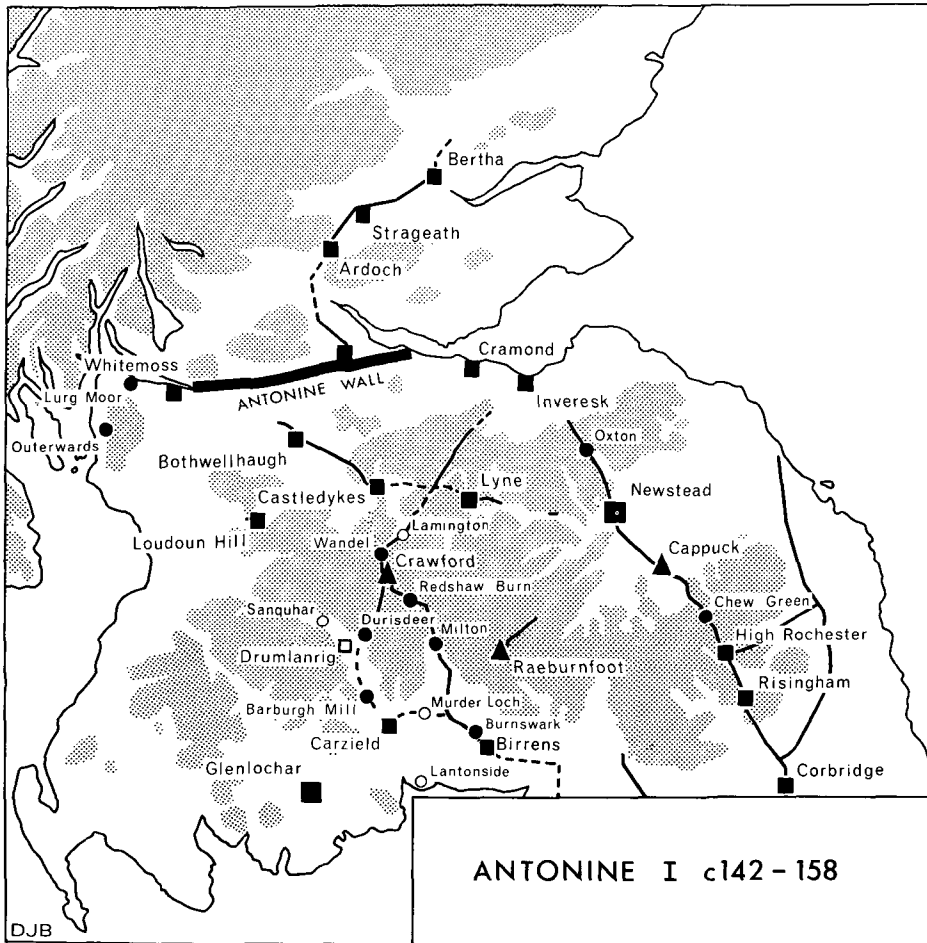
ILLUS 6   Roman forts north of the Tyne–Solway isthmus considered to date to the mid second century
          (Antonine I period)

successor remain a matter of speculation, we are on surer ground when considering the Severan
invasion. Contemporary historians offer four reasons for the British expedition of 208–11. Severus
wished to take his sons away from the flesh-pots of Rome (Dio 76.14.1, Herodian 3.14.1); the army
required some stiffening (Dio 76.11.1); Severus himself liked fighting (Herodian 3.14.2); the gover-
nor wrote to Severus that the northern tribes had invaded the province and either the presence of the
emperor or more troops were required to deal with the situation (Herodian 3.14.1). Dio also states
explicitly that Severus's aim was to conquer the rest of the island (76.13.1). There seems to be no
special reason why the presence of the emperor was required and Professor A R Birley suggests that
Herodian's statement about the British 'crisis' was a stock phrase, citing parallels from the reign of
Severus Alexander (Birley 1973, 187–8). Yet Herodian maintained that he was giving the gist of the
governor's letter requesting the presence of the emperor and Birley suggests therefore that Herodian
has merely repeated official propaganda: the British 'crisis' was the *casus belli* for the invasion of
Severus. Whatever the reason for the invasion, however, there is no doubt that the death of Severus

in February 211 brought an abrupt end to the campaigning and a relinquishment of all the Roman conquests. Rome failed to complete the conquest of the island because of the death of her emperor rather than defeat in the field.

Caracalla's reaction on his father's death was to return to Rome, the centre of power, immediately, even though this entailed loss of the hard-won gains in Britain (Dio 77.1.1), a natural move, but also one emphasizing the geographical isolation of Britain. The Severan expedition introduces a further factor. While in earlier decades of the empire it was possible for the empire to be expanded by provincial governors, from the middle of the second century 'it is assumed that all major campaigns, defensive or offensive, require direct command by the (or an) Emperor in person' (Millar 1982, 22). Thus Britain's geographical isolation ensured that only emperors secure in their authority, such as Septimius Severus, would campaign in the island. During the remainder of the third century no emperor was either secure or free to give time to the British frontier, which was in any case seemingly peaceful, and it was only with the restoration of strong, central authority by Diocletian at the end of the century that the situation changed. It may not be altogether coincidental that now occurred the next expedition against the northern tribes of Britain when Constantius Chlorus campaigned against the Picts shortly before his death in 306. Yet with enemies on so many other frontiers Rome in the fourth century was only able to maintain the status quo in Britain, not undertake new offensives aimed at permanent conquest.

CONCLUSIONS

The two serious attempts to complete the conquest of Britain, under Agricola and Severus, failed, not because of a defeat of the Roman army in the island, but because problems elsewhere led to a failure to follow up Roman victories. In the 80s troops were required on the Danube; in 211 the emperor died and was not able to enforce his will on his son from beyond the grave. The invasion of the early 140s does not appear to have been an attempt to complete the conquest of the island, but the above discussion, which has highlighted the possibility of a political reason for the invasion, has helped to emphasize the fact that the location of the British frontier was determined at least as much by external factors as by local conditions. Local factors must have played a part, however. The Highlands did prevent a smooth advance northwards. The combative nature of the northern tribes slowed the northern progress of the Roman army. The lack of economic riches in the north offered no temptation to the Romans to stay. The supply of the army may have been perceived as a problem. The political backwardness of the north rendered local government difficult. All these factors must have played their part in some way: north Britain was not attractive even to people who saw their purpose as ruling the world. But on top of an underlying unattractive proposition lay the immediate political needs of a military dictatorship, whose primary aim must be the security of its hold on the existing empire, on the periphery of which Britain lay. After Domitian's advance in Britain (and Germany) had ground to a halt in the face of Dacian aggression on the lower Danube, Trajan sought his military glory in the traditional area, the East. Hadrian sought no expansion whatsoever. Antoninus Pius extended the empire in Britain and in Germany, though only for the former did he claim the imperial acclamation. His operation, however, was a limited nature. Marcus Aurelius was concerned with invasions elsewhere – the East and middle Danube. Commodus was concerned with pleasure (though not entirely; cf the new defensive measures on the Danube initiated during his reign). Severus turned to Britain when he had exhausted the other frontiers. After his time the empire was not in a position to be realistically interested in expansion. The occasions were few when all political and military factors combined to allow an aggressive policy in northern Britain within the relatively short period of 150 years which commenced in 69, that is before the civil wars of the third century effectively ended

any possibility of expansion. Vespasian had served in Britain and ordered advance, and Domitian's policy can be seen as a continuation of that. Severus could perhaps be seen as following Trajan's expansionist lead, but extending beyond it by taking action in Britain as well as elsewhere. Antoninus Pius was not troubled on other frontiers: an advance to the end of the island might have been possible in his day, but he chose not to pursue it. For such reasons – imperial power politics – as much, if not more, than local problems did Scotland remain outside the Roman empire.

NOTES

1   Mann and Penman 1977 is the most useful collection of literary sources relating to the history of Roman Britain. All literary sources cited in the text follow their system of referencing.
2   This section is one of the best surviving stretches of the Antonine Wall and forms part of the 7·5 km of the Wall, including four forts, the site of a fortlet, and three 'expansions', in the care of Historic Buildings and Monuments. Three of the Gask Ridge watch-towers are also in the care of HBM. These sites and the other surviving Roman military remains are described and placed in their wider context in Keppie 1986; a briefer treatment can be found in Breeze 1979.
3   Another problem of cause and effect in the same part of the country is whether the perceived lack of Romanization in those areas behind Hadrian's Wall was the cause of the army's failure to move on (Rivet 1969, 190-2), or was the effect of the army's continuing presence (Breeze 1988, 15, 19-20).

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