

Roman Britain II

Week two will look at the Romans' further annexation of Britain, particularly under the leadership of Agricola. Focusing on extracts from the work of Tacitus, we shall consider how successful the Romans were in their attempts to annexe northern Britain, including what is now Scotland, and why the decision was made to build a wall in the second century, under the emperor Hadrian.

The literary evidence for this period is most often supplied by Tacitus, who was writing in the late first century, within 20-30 years of events in Britain. He therefore had access to primary source accounts - and he was the son-in-law of one of the most famous governors of Britain, Gnaeus Julius Agricola.

Agricola was governor of Britannia from 77 or 78CE until 84, and he had also served in Britain as a young man under the future emperor Vespasian, who had commanded the second legion (Augusta). He had therefore witnessed at first hand events in Britain in the period before the Boudiccan rebellion. He had also commanded the twentieth legion under Cerealis in the aftermath of that rebellion.

Tacitus's *Agricola*, a detailed story of Agricola's life and career, is not a straight-forward historical account: it is a eulogy, and Tacitus himself explains this at the beginning of the *Agricola*, which differs in style from his more objective *Annals* and *Histories*. We therefore have to be wary lest Tacitus's account is so biased as to render it unreliable. Although we have archaeological and epigraphic evidence to help us triangulate and test this literary evidence, much is still inconclusive.

There is little doubt that Agricola must have been a formidable general. Most scholars agree, however, that, in order to present Agricola in a favourable light, Tacitus is perhaps less than generous to Agricola's predecessors.

Tacitus treats both Cerealis and Frontinus (Agricola's immediate predecessors) with brevity but records their strategic success. Clearly, Agricola would not have achieved as much as he did without considerable progress having already been made in the north (Brigantia) and the west (Wales – the territory of the Silures). It is probable that construction of the fort at Chester was already begun when Agricola arrived as governor. (Lead pipes, source 105, bearing Agricola's name would have been installed at a very late stage of construction.)

***inventa Britannia et subacta*, Agricola 33 (source 103)**

Tacitus's account is fulsome in its praise of Agricola's achievements, but this does not mean that Agricola's successes were fabricated by his over-zealous son-in-law. The remains of forts along the Stanegate (the most famous of which is Vindolanda) all attest to Agricola's decision to establish a garrison right across the northern part of what is now England to defend the province. In addition, we know from evidence of military camps right up into the north of Scotland that Agricola did indeed go further than any previous Roman leader. It should also be remembered that Tacitus was narrating events in *The Agricola* from living memory, probably in 98 CE: he would not have been the only Roman with a link to witnesses; he would have damaged his reputation as a historian, if he had strayed detectably too far from the truth.

Internal evidence is also interesting. Tacitus puts into the mouth of the Caledonian leader (Calgacus) a speech that would not have been out of place in the Roman forum. Although this is unlikely to have been a verbatim representation of what Calgacus said before the battle of Mons Graupius, its intelligence and rhetorical style suggest that Tacitus (and no doubt Agricola) deemed him a worthy

opponent, and Tacitus's account of the enemy's conduct suggests, arguably, some objectivity. In spite of Tacitus's gripping account of this battle, Mons Graupius could hardly be considered an outright victory. (See Agricola 36-38.)

Britannia perdomita et statim omitta: Britain was conquered and immediately abandoned.

Tacitus, Histories I, 2 (Source 110)

Agricola was recalled in 83 or 84 CE after an unusually long period as governor. While Britain had not been entirely conquered (as Tacitus suggests it was), Agricola had established a legionary fortress at Inchtuthil (in Perth and Kinross, overlooking the Tay) and had made considerable inroads into the north. (It is likely that though Agricola began the building at Inchtuthill, he did not complete it – numismatic evidence suggests it was still under construction in 86.) The new emperor, Domitian (whom Tacitus detested) was committed to wars elsewhere and the second legion was withdrawn from Britain to fight in his Dacian Wars. With only three legions in occupation of Britain, Inchtuthil was soon abandoned, probably by 88. The twentieth legion was moved back to the south. The cost of reducing the far north was presumably deemed too high.

The next three decades saw the gradual development of Lincoln and Gloucester as colonies, while the remaining fortresses at Caerleon, Chester and York were strengthened with stone defences. The epigraphic evidence attests to the building and manning of these areas (sources 113-117).

The Emperor Trajan meanwhile (98-117) had focused on extending the Roman Empire to the east. It was left to his successor Hadrian (117-138) to begin the work of consolidation. There was to be no further expansion of the empire and Hadrian's reign saw the construction of physical barriers to mark the boundaries of the Romanised lands. The emperor himself came to Britain in 122, the same year that work on his northern wall was begun. Although literary evidence for this period and the wall's construction is sparse (source 119), we have a plethora of epigraphic and numismatic evidence. It helps that the legion's civil engineers always "autographed" their work and that Roman emperors always advertised their achievements by issuing coins. (See sources 120-130.)

The wall was about 76 miles long (80 Roman miles) from Wallsend in the east to the Solway coast in the west (Source 119). It was mostly built of stone, with rubble placed internally and dressed stone facing the outside (and much of this has been taken over the centuries and can be seen in settlements and houses in the vicinity). In some places the original width of the foundations does not match the subsequent wall – it became less deep in places and was built with turf in some areas towards the west. The original concept included mile castles, providing, in most cases, a route through the wall and sufficient space to billet a small force of men. Between each milecastle were two turrets, evenly spaced (with those remaining identified by A or B along with numbers for the milecastles). Some forts were later built into the walls, indicating a further change of plan in places, with Housesteads being the best preserved (and with the remains of the original turret – 36b - it replaced). A system of signals could quickly be transmitted along the wall. It was built along the highest ground to afford the best views to north and south. On the evidence of sources 123-132, we can be sure that some building work continued to take place from 122 until about 138.

And why did he build it? To keep out the Caledonian tribes? To keep in the pacified tribes to the south? To divide and rule? To make trade through the wall subject to tax and travel to tolls? Or was it simply a symbol of consolidation and the boundary to Roman rule. Whatever the reasons for its construction, it was superseded almost immediately by a new turf wall, half its length, across the narrowest part of what is now Scotland. This Antonine Wall was built by the command of Hadrian's successor (source 133), the emperor Antoninus (138-161).