

Introduction

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A map of the Roman empire – any map – shows the empire at a particular point of time, usually during the reign of Trajan (98–117) when, for a brief period of three years, the eastern frontier was pushed forward into Parthia. This is misleading: a map indicating the extent of the empire between the accession of Hadrian and the losses of the 260s would be more appropriate. Even so, such a map would only depict the empire for a period of about 150 years during a life of centuries.

The expansion and contraction of the empire is, of course, reflected in some maps. Nevertheless, these maps present the territorial extent of that empire: they do not show the extent of the influence of Rome. That might be demonstrated by a map indicating the spread of Roman artefacts beyond the empire, or the activities of the Roman army or Roman explorers. These worlds were much wider than the territorial extent of the empire.

The Roman army

It is worth noting the extent of Roman military activity (Sherk 1974, 537–42 lists expeditions and references). In the first century BC, Pompey reached the southern flanks of the Caucasus Mountains: he was recorded as being within three days' march of the Caspian Sea before he turned back. Under Augustus, Drusus explored the North Sea Coast as far as Jutland, reaching the River Elbe, which Domitian Ahenobarbus later crossed. Along the southern boundary, Cornelius Balbus penetrated deep into the Sahara Desert, sacking the capital of the Garamantes at Garama. A military incursion dealt with the threat from the kingdom of Ethiopia south of Egypt while an expedition sailed down the Red Sea as far as modern Yemen. The reign of Augustus may have been noteworthy for such activities, but imperial expeditions continued. Under Domitian (81–96) Demetrius of Tarsus was dispatched to explore islands off Britain while Agricola sent his fleet to the Orkney Islands (Plutarch, *On the disuse of oracles* 18, Tacitus, *Agricola* 10). Both Trajan and Severus campaigned beyond the eastern frontier, capturing Ctesiphon on the River Tigris, the former even reaching the Persian Gulf (Cassius Dio, *History of Rome* 68, 28, 4; 76, 9, 4; 68, 29, 1).

Roman soldiers left their mark on the world which they explored. A centurion named Aurelius recorded his name on a rock on the fortress of Zinchechra near Garama in the Fezzan province of modern Libya. In the second century, legionaries left an inscription at Trencin, north of the Danube in what is now the Czech Republic. Marching camps no doubt will in



Illus 2 *The name of the centurion Aurelios carved on the summit of the hill-fort at Zinchechra deep in the Sahara desert.*

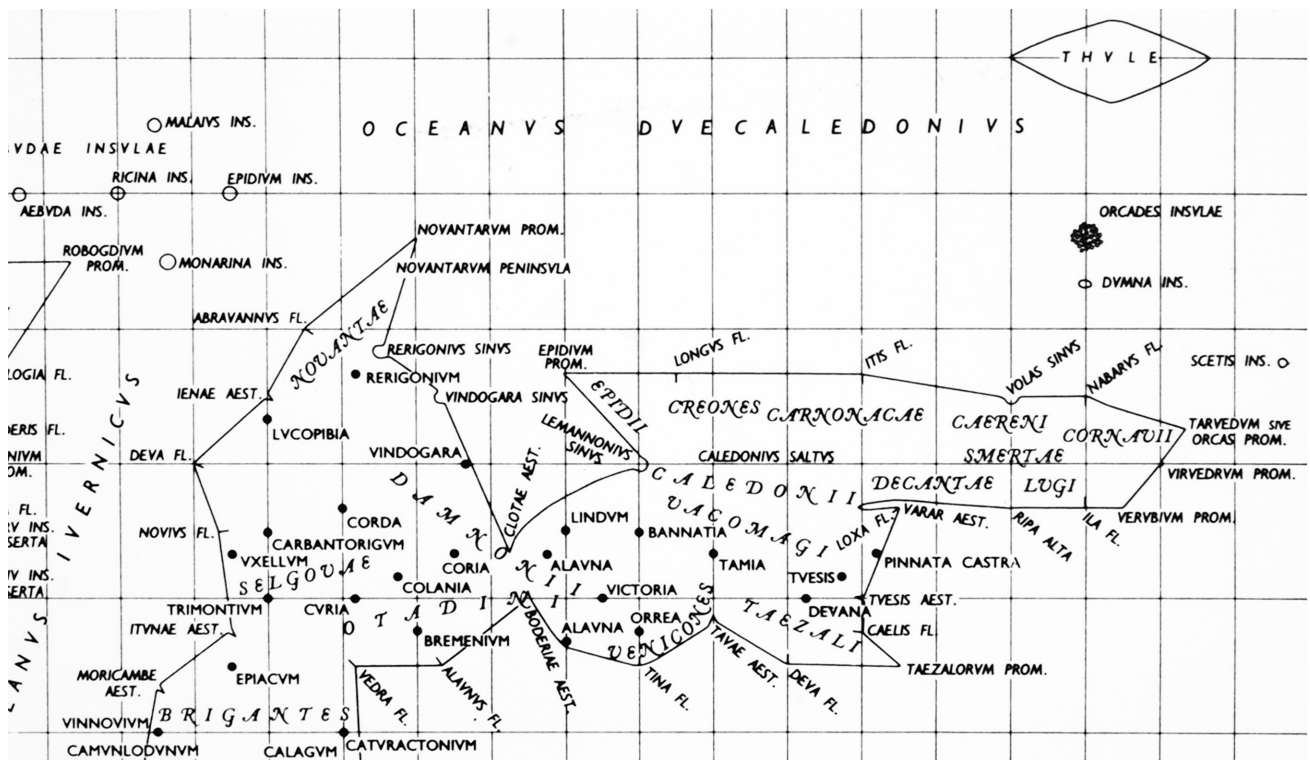
time provide additional evidence of Roman military activities: a newly discovered camp in Slovakia brings Romans arms towards the southern Polish border.

This world of the Roman army is rarely depicted on maps (though, see *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome*), yet it was a real and important world. In the first century AD this expansionist era gradually gave way to the defensive world of Roman frontiers.

The first Roman contact with Scotland

The earliest Roman contacts with Scotland lie between these two worlds and an appreciation of the potential reach of the Roman army is an important aid to our understanding of the texts which deal with the first Roman contacts with north Britain. These text are just one of the sources available to us in helping us come to an understanding of the first Roman contact with Scotland. Each type of source is, however, open to interpretation, even the literary references. Who today believes everything they read in a newspaper? In antiquity it was no different, every writer had an axe to grind. The relevant literary references are provided at the end of this paper.

The literary sources reveal the extent of earlier geographical knowledge about northern Britain. Caesar knew that Britain was an island and had a good idea of its size, presumably as a result of the voyage of Pytheas about 320 BC (Caesar, *The Gallic War*, 5, 13; Breeze 2002 considers pre-Agricolan geographical knowledge). Mela, writing before the invasion of Britain in AD 43, recorded the Orkney and Shetland Islands and, like his predecessor Strabo, knew the existence of somewhere beyond, called Thule (Mela, *Concerning*



Illus 3 A modern depiction of the material relating to north Britain contained in Ptolemy's Geography.

Chorography 2, 6; Strabo, *Geography* 1, 4, 2–5)). Caledonia is mentioned by pre-Agricolan writers. To these sources we can add the discovery at the Broch of Gurness in Orkney of a fragment of an amphora dating to the mid first century BC to the mid first century AD which Fitzpatrick saw as supporting evidence for the statement by Eutropius that the Orkney Islands had submitted to the Emperor Claudius (Fitzpatrick 1989).

It is with that framework as well as with the long arm of the Roman army in mind that we should consider the statement of Statius that Vettius Bolanus, governor from 69 to 71, built lookout posts and forts and administered justice on the plains of Caledonia (Statius, *Silvae* 142–9). While the location of Caledonia is undefined in this reference, it presumably lay north of the Firth of Forth and probably beyond the River Tay, where Tacitus places Caledonia and Ptolemy the Caledones (Tacitus, *Agricola* 23–25; Ptolemy, *Geography* 2, 3, 8; Breeze 1992). From the Humber to the Forth is 300 km, with an extra 50 km to the Tay. This may be compared to the distance of 400 km which separated the Rivers Rhine and Elbe. The reality of the possibility of Bolanus campaigning so far north, however, receives a cold douche from the statement elsewhere in the poem that he also penetrated to Thule, which lay beyond the Orkney Isles (Statius, *Silvae* 5, 2, 53–6).

Caledonia and Thule appear as semi-mythical places continued throughout the Roman period. According to Florus, Caesar pursued the Britons to the Caledonian woods while Claudian recounted that Count Theodosius in 367, 'pitched camp amidst the

Caledonian frosts ... the Orcades were drenched with slaughter of the Saxon; Thule became warm with Pictish blood ...' (Claudian, *On the Fourth Consulate of Honorius*, 23–4). Momigliano, in arguing that Silius Italicus' first century reference to Vespasian's penetration of the Caledonian forest and the conquest of Thule was an allusion to the Claudian conquest, stated that 'the adjective "Caledonius" was used loosely or at least irresponsibly even in the first century AD and therefore, by implication, dispose of any theory that takes "Caledonius" in Flavian sources to allude distinctly and truthfully in every instance to the territory north of the Forth–Clyde line' (Momigliano 1950, 41–2). In similar vein, many writers state that their hero had undertaken an action actually done by someone else (eg Josephus, *The Jewish War* 3, 4 ascribes the conquest of Britain to Vespasian rather than to Claudius or to his governor Aulus Plautius) or was the first to discover that, for example, Thule was unknown until then (as Silius Italicus claims for Vespasian) or first discovered Britain to be an island (as Tacitus claims for Agricola: *Agricola* 10), even though the truth was well known.

We should also place the claims within a wider context. In a different part of his poem, Silius Italicus suggests that Domitian might outdo the exploits of his father and conquer the people of the Ganges and Bactria, surely an overblown comparison of Domitian with Alexander.

It is not necessarily easy to separate the panegyricists from those writing history, not least as the writing of history meant a different thing to the ancients than



Illus 4 Map of Roman military deployment north of the Tyne-Solway isthmus about 86.

to a modern writer. The *Agricola* is often viewed as an historical account of the events associated with the author's father-in-law's governorship in Britain but it is far from that. Rather, in our terms, it is a hagiographical appreciation justifying the actions of men living in difficult times: its emphases and omissions must be seen with the context of its purpose.

We must also take into account that ancient writers, as modern ones, could make mistakes. Tacitus confused the Brigantes with the Iceni (*Agricola* 30) and there is doubt about some of the information provided by Ptolemy (Rivet and Smith 1980, 120–21). Our sources are so few that we cannot ascertain what other errors occur in them.

To return to the activities of the Roman army. These related to the Roman view that the world was theirs to conquer, indeed, it was their purpose, as Virgil stated (*Aeniad* 1, 278–9). It is within the framework of this view that we should interpret Roman intentions in Britain. Claudius ordered his governor to 'conquer the rest' (Cassius Dio, *History of Rome* 21, 5); the activities of the three Flavian governors from 71 to 83 strongly suggest that their aim was total conquest of the island; and this is explicitly stated by the contemporary historian Dio as the aim of the Emperor Septimius Severus over 100 years later (Cassius Dio, *History of Rome* 76, 13, 1).

The speed of the conquest of the tribes of the Welsh peninsula and north Britain from the Humber up to the Scottish Highlands and possibly beyond in a mere 12 years perforce created a fluid situation. Campaign bases might be constructed only to be abandoned once the conquest was completed, the army of Britain might operate in one group or several, forts might be built but abandoned as the situation developed, one, two or more seasons later. It has long been appreciated that the military remains north of the Tyne–Solway isthmus reflect such a fluid situation, with, for example, camps or forts of four phases being recognised at Dalswinton in Nithsdale in the late first century.

This fluidity renders the interpretation of the first century installations north of the Forth difficult. Twenty years ago we could create a story, but that was thrown into disarray by the publication of Hobley's study of the late first century coins found at the forts north of the Cheviots (Hobley 1989). While coins of 86 appear, there are none known of the following year. This suggests that these forts were abandoned within the maximum of the two years from 86 to 88 and probably earlier in that period. Previously, the end date of the most northerly forts was 'about 90'. Following Hobley's review, for those wishing to believe a chronology based upon a straightforward reading of the *Agricola*, the maximum length of the Agricolan phase north of the Forth was shortened from a maximum of 14 years to 9 or 10 into which the building and abandoning of all forts and towers had to fall. Indeed, if you believe, as I do, that the army may not have constructed permanent

forts north of the Forth until after Mons Graupius, that time slot could narrow to four to five years.

Current problems

Whatever our interpretation of the literary sources, it is not possible on present evidence to determine the sequence of forts and towers north of the Tay. Some sites had two periods and it is interesting that these lie along the road leading north, but it is not clear what the implications of this are. It is even more difficult when we move to consider Roman intentions. The forts along the edge of the Highlands have often been interpreted as blocking the entries and exits to the glens, and perhaps even dating to Agricola's advance in 82–3. But, it is clear that the lynch-pin of the occupation was the legionary base at Inchtuthil which was abandoned unfinished. It is therefore possible that other elements of the occupation were abandoned, even before they were built. Archaeologists are used to working with a jigsaw of which many pieces have not survived; in this case the jigsaw may never have been completed by its maker. Accordingly, it is even harder than usual to determine the function(s) of the military installations of north Britain. Were the Highland Line forts intended to block access to or from the glens or to serve as springboards for advances up the glens? Certainly, this might be thought to receive some support from the location of Inchtuthil north of the Tay – and assuming that the course of the river has not changed since Roman times (Pitts and St Joseph 1985, 41–3). But, the crucial point is that we don't know because no Roman writer set down Roman intentions and plans. We can only surmise from a consideration of the available evidence. Disagreement will be inevitable, and it is for that reason that we might be wise to use more neutral terms in describing the military remains, 'the Highland Line forts', for example, rather than 'glen blockers'.

We have the same problem in relation to the Gask Ridge towers and fortlets. Did they form a frontier as I once firmly believed, or did they more prosaically help to enforce control over an area within the frontier zone as David Woolliscroft has argued (Breeze 1983, 235–6; Woolliscroft 1993, 300; Woolliscroft and Hoffmann 2006, 230–1)?

We stand at an interesting point. Re-examination of the numismatic evidence has forced a change of view in the last 20 years. The literary sources are being critically examined. Excavation continues to produce challenging evidence. The very topography in which these events happened is being subjected to fresh eyes. Evidence from the rest of the empire is being brought into play. It is within this framework that the conference, First Contact: Rome and North Britain, took place in May 2008, with archaeologists presenting the new – and old – evidence and offering their interpretations and conclusions.

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Roman literary references to north Britain in the first century

In this selection of the literary sources for Britain north of the Forth, produced as a handout at the conference, I have cited first the earliest references, written before Agricola's governorship (77–83), followed by later quotations. Several other writers mention Caledonia and the Caledonian forest, but provide no additional information.

Pre-Agricolan references

- Strabo* (64 BC – AD 21+), 'Geography' 1, 4, 2–5 'the meridian which runs through Thule, which Pytheas says is distant six days' sailing from Britain and is near the frozen sea.'
- 4, 5, 5 'as regards those who are close to the frozen zone ... he says that there is a lack of some of our crops and animals and a shortage of others, and

that they live on millet and other vegetables and fruits and roots; and those who have grain and honey get a drink also from them. Since they have no pure sunshine, they pound the corn in large houses, having gathered the ears together there, for threshing floors become useless because of the lack of sun and the rain.'

- Diodorus Siculus* (about 30 BC), 'History' 5, 21–2 'The island is triangular in shape. ... the last promontory, they say, extends into the sea and is called Orkas.'

- Mela* (about 40), 'Concerning Chorography' 2, 6 'There are 30 *Orcades*, separated from one another by narrow spaces, and seven *Haemodae*, located towards Germany ... *Thyle* ... is situated opposite the shores of the *Belgae*. In it, because the sun rises far from its setting, the nights are short; in winter they are dark as elsewhere, but light in summer, because at that time the sun raises itself higher and although it is not seen itself, yet it lights up the parts nearest to it with its neighbouring glow; but at the solstice there are no nights, because then it reveals nor merely a glow but even the most art of itself.'

- Lucan* (39–65), 'Pharsalia' 6, 68 'Pompey did not at first notice what Caesar was about, much as ... a Caledonian Briton would remain unaware of the Kentish surf.'

- Pliny the Elder* (died 79), 'Natural History' 4, 102 'In nearly thirty years, exploration of Britain has not been carried by Roman arms beyond the vicinity of the Caledonian Forest.'

Post-Agricolan references

- Statius* (45–96), 'Forests' ('*Silvae*') (contains a panegyric to *Crispinus*, son of *Vettius Bolanus*, governor of Britain from 69 to 71)
- 5, 2, 53–6 'Learn the example of your own mighty father, who, carrying out his commission, penetrated to Thule, barrier of the western water, where always Hyperion grows weary.'
- 142–9 'What glory will exalt the plains of Caledonia, when an ancient native of that wild land tells you: "This was where your father used to administer justice. This is the mound from which he addressed his cavalry. Far and wide – do you see them? – he set lookout posts and forts, and he had the ditch put round these walls. Here are the presents and weapons he dedicated to the gods of war – you can make out the inscriptions still. Here is the breast-plate he put on at battle's summons; here is one he wrenched from a British king."

Valerius Flaccus (written 79–93/5), *The Voyage of the Argonauts* 1, 8

‘And thou too [Vespasian], that didst win still greater glory for opening up the sea, after the Caledonian ocean had borne they sails.’

Tacitus (writing in 98), *Agricola* 10

‘Britain’s position and its peoples have been described by many writers. I shall offer my own account, not to compete with their diligence and literary talent, but because Britain was then [i.e. under Agricola] for the first time completely conquered. ... It was then that a Roman fleet for the first time circumnavigated this coast of the remotest sea and established that Britain is in fact an island. Then too it discovered the islands, hitherto unknown, which are called the Orcades, and subjugated them. Thule was thoroughly viewed....’

17 ‘Petilius Cerialis at once struck them with terror by attacking the state of the Brigantes.’

20 (second season) ‘many states which up to that moment had operated on equal terms abandoned violence and gave hostages. They were also surrounded by garrisons and forts, which such skill and thoroughness that no new part of Britain ever came over with so little damage.’

22 ‘The third year of campaigns opened up new peoples with the ravaging of the territories up to the Taus [Tay].’

24 ‘In the fifth year of the campaigns he crossed in the leading ship and defeated peoples up to that time unknown in a series of actions. He lined up his forces in that part of Britain which faces Ireland...’

25 ‘In the summer in which he began his sixth year in post, he enveloped the states situated beyond the Bodotria (Forth).’

26 ‘Consciousness of this success ... emboldened the army. “Nothing can stand in the way of courage,” they roared, “we must go deep into Caledonia, and, fighting battle after battle we must find the furthest limit to Britain at last.”

Silius Italicus (25/6–101), *Punica* 3, 597–629

‘The father of that family [the Flavian emperors] shall give Rome victory over Thule, unknown till then, and shall be the first to lead an army against the Caledonian forests ... Then his son, unrivalled in mighty strength of mind, shall take up his father’s task and move on in majesty, raising his head as high as his power... [He = Domitian] shall outdo the exploits of his father and brother. The people of the Ganges shall one day lower their unbent bows before him, and Bactra display its empty quivers ...’

Plutarch (about 50–120), *On the disuse of oracles* 18

‘Demetrius said that there were many desert islands scattered around *Bretannia*, some of which were named from the spirits and heroes. He said that he himself, having been sent by the emperor to enquire into and inspect them, had sailed to the

islands nearest to the deserted ones; it did not have many inhabitants, but they were all held sacred and inviolate by the Britons.’

Juvenal (writing about 100–112), *Satire* 2, 159–60

‘our armies have pushed beyond the Irish coast and the recently captured Orkneys, and also Britain with its paltry ration of darkness.’

Florus (about 120), *Epitome of Roman History* 1, 45

‘So having returned to Gaul, he [Julius Caesar] crossed the same ocean and attacked the same Britons with a larger fleet and increased forces. Having pursued them to the Caledonian woods he also took captive one of their kings, Cassuellaunus.’

Cassius Dio (about 200), *History of Rome* 66, 20

‘Meanwhile war had broken out in Britain and Gnaeus Julius Agricola overran the whole of the enemy’s territory there. He was the first of the Romans whom we know to discover the fact that Britain is surrounded by water. It seems that some soldiers rebelled, and after slaying the centurions and a military tribune took refuge in boats, in which they put to sea and sailed round the western portion of the country just as the wind and the waves chanced to carry them; and without realising it, since they approached from the opposite direction, they put in at the camps on the first side again. Thereupon Agricola sent others to attempt the voyage around Britain, and learned from them, too, that it was an island. As a result of these events in Britain Titus received the title of *imperator* for the fifteenth time.’

Eutropius (about 365), *Abridgement of Roman History* 7, 13, 3

‘Claudius ... added to the Roman empire certain islands in the ocean beyond Britain, called the Orchades’.

Orosius (about 415), *A History against the Pagans* 1, 2, 75–82

‘At its (ie Britain) back, where it faces an unbounded ocean, it has the Orcades islands ... then there is the island of Thyle, which is separated from the rest by an infinite distance, lying in the middle of the ocean towards the west-north-west; it is held to be scarcely known to few people.’

7, 6, 10 ‘He [Claudius] also added to the Roman Empire the Orcades islands, which lie in the ocean beyond Britain.’

Other ancient sources mentioned in the volume

Caesar *The Gallic War*

Claudian *On the Fourth Consulate of Honorius*

Josephus *The Jewish War*

Ptolemy *Geography*

Virgil *Aeneid*

Selected emperors, governors and events recorded in literature.

emperor	governor	event
Claudius (AD 41–54)		orders invasion of Britain adds Orkney islands to the empire
Nero (AD 454–68)	Vetius Bolanus (AD 469–71)	campaigns to Caledonian plains
Vespasian (AD 469–79)	Petilius Cerialis (AD 471–74)	attacks Brigantes
	Iulius Frontinus (AD 474–77)	campaigns in Wales
	Iulius Agricola (AD 477–83)	AD 478 states give hostages, forts built
Titus (AD 479–81)		AD 479 opened up new peoples AD 480 placed garrisons on Forth–Clyde line
Domitian (AD 481–96)		AD 481 crossed in leading ship defeated peoples hitherto unknown AD 482 enveloped states beyond <i>Bodotria</i> AD 483 defeats Caledonians at Mons Graupius sends fleet round Britain

