

Conclusions

David J Breeze

The conference in Perth saw a useful presentation and re-consideration of the available evidence for the first Roman contact with Scotland. This evidence has been reviewed – and interpreted in different ways – in this volume. It takes several forms.

The literary sources

Leo Rivet coined the phrase, ‘the opinions of modern scholars’ (Rivet 1958, 28–31). This statement is important because it emphasises that parts of our interpretations are almost always based on, and therefore restricted by, the opinions of our teachers, as well of course as our own prejudices. We might write, Tacitus got it wrong, but what we mean is, our former interpretation was wrong. Further, too often our own opinions are clothed in fine language which makes them appear more convincing, but they remain exactly what they are, opinions.

The literary sources relating to the first contact with Scotland have not increased. What has changed is our interpretation of them. The nub of the problem is that Tacitus does not state where Agricola operated in his second season. Modern commentators have filled the gap by suggesting that he completed the conquest of the Brigantes started by his predecessor-but-one, Cerialis. The early dendrochronological date of 72 for timber in the fort at Carlisle allows us to believe not just that Cerialis completed the conquest of the Brigantes himself (Tacitus, *Agricola* 17), but also that he built at least one fort, and, in particular, one as far north as the Solway Estuary. This has liberated us in several ways.

i The conquest of the Brigantes appears to have been a more straightforward operation than hitherto conceived: if Cerialis could achieve so much in three seasons, might he have campaigned even further north (as Birley 1953, 40–1 suggested)?

ii If Cerialis had completed both phases of the conquest and occupation of the Brigantes, what did Agricola do in his second season? If Cerialis had completed that task, might Agricola not have campaigned north, well north, of Brigantian territory in that year?

iii Bearing in mind the extent of Cerialis’ activities, could one of his predecessors have campaigned over such a sweep of territory?

These thoughts are tremendously releasing because they allow the mind to encompass possible interpretations hitherto suppressed or ignored. Might indeed be Statius interpreted literally in his claims for Bolanus?

New interpretations might extend to the intention of the emperor himself, as Shotter has emphasised in this volume. He has offered a new reason for Vespasian’s activities in Britain: the need to add legitimacy to his new dynasty. This in turn is a useful reminder that emperors and princes were not always truthful in stating their intentions (Millar 1982, 1 quoting Cassius Dio, *History of Rome* 75, 3, 2–3), but we tend to believe them as we have no alternative ancient comment.

And, staying with emperors, these papers also raise questions of decision making. Who decided where the frontier lay? Tacitus appears to tell us that it was the emperor (*Agricola* 23). But how far does this relate to actions – or lack of actions – on the ground? Was the pause – the consolidation – of 80 and 81 the result of Vespasian’s death and Titus’ lack of interest, or the necessity for the army of Britain to supply troops for service elsewhere? Here are two aspects which might not always be in conjunction, the interest of the emperor and the position of the general on the spot (for the close relationship between general and ruler see Sherck 1974, 536 for reports from commander to the Senate during the Republic and Miller 1982 for the empire).

There are times when the two interests coincide almost exactly. Agricola was an early supporter of Vespasian; he was, in effect, a Flavian placeman, as was his son-in-law Tacitus, as Shotter (this volume) emphasises. Our attempt to interpret Tacitus is affected both by imperial spin (cf Cassius Dio, *History of Rome* 75, 3, 2–3) and personal spin for the *Agricola* was not merely an eulogy but a justification of the actions of good people living under bad rulers, in this case the good people being the direct clients if not actual friends of the rulers, again as Shotter reminds us.

At least we can perceive these different nuances. How do we determine the level at which decisions were made? Do the differences in camps, as evidenced in the Stracathro-style entrances, or by the ‘parrot-beak’ entrances in forts, indicated different dates or the planning of different legions and how far did events elsewhere affect the activities of the army of Britain as Jones asks?

Coin evidence

Excavation has naturally led to an increase in the number of coins available for study and this leads to gradually changes in the focus of interpretations. Shotter (this volume) has drawn attention to the early coins north of the Tyne–Solway isthmus, including up to the River Tay. This in turn can be used to support the argument that Bolanus did indeed build forts in Caledonia. Yet coins only provide *termini post quem*,

and a handful of early coins do not in themselves constitute evidence for early occupation. Hanson (this volume) has argued that the single coin of Nero dating to 66 found at Strageath may have no more relevance for indicating the start of occupation than the four or five Republican *denarii* of Mark Anthony. He has also emphasised the significance of the deposition hoard at Elginhaugh, which ends in a slightly worn coin of 77–78, in helping determine the date of the forts constructed between the Tyne–Solway and Forth–Clyde isthmuses, and therefore those further north.

The archaeological evidence

Carlisle is an important site. Not only has it produced a dendrochronological date of 72, which supported the early date of the samian pottery from the site, but excavations in 2000 created a wholly new view of a Roman fort. During the excavation, many timbers were recovered, producing dates for 12 of the 14 years the fort was occupied in its first phase. In short, we must reject the simple view that a military installation was built, occupied and abandoned in favour of one in which the built fort was tinkered with throughout its occupation. How do we relate this to the phases noted by Woolliscroft and others in the Gask towers? Perhaps this could be summed up in one word, caution. Several phases may simply relate to the same number of years: we have no idea how long a phase lasted. The four phases at Cargill, apparently our most complicated site, may equal four seasons. Dobat (this volume) has suggested that the two phases at the Gask towers relate to conquest and occupation. Hanson, more fundamentally, has challenged the scale of the evidence for multiple phases of occupation at forts and extensive rebuilding or repair in the towers on the Gask Ridge.

How can we determine the length of occupation? Many commentators refer to the few finds from military sites north of the Forth–Clyde isthmus. This has led Dobat to propose an alternative view, that the towers may not have been permanently occupied.

In helping to understand the more northerly problems, Wilson's review of the archaeological evidence for the earliest Roman phases in Yorkshire (this volume) is important in suggested that there may be pre-Flavian occupation at York and even further north at Rocliffe. The possibility of movement northwards from the River Don into the Vale of York in the 60s strengthens the case for earlier military penetration into what is now Scotland. Wilson's paper is also useful in helping us understand the process of expansion and control, not least that the arrival of the Roman's upset earlier tribal affiliations.

Pattern and purpose

Once the Gask towers were seen as signal-stations, then they became part of a frontier line. Both, however,

are merely our interpretations and we can change our mind(s). It is instructive to go back to Robertson's concluding remarks in her 1973 excavation report on three of the towers: 'they were intervisible, and also had a wide out-look to the north and south as well as along the Roman road. Each could have held a few men only, whose base must have been at a permanent fort, perhaps Strageath, and whose function must have been to maintain a patrolling watch or look-out. They could also have received and sent on signals. Whether or not the Gask ridge can be correctly designated a *limes*, as has been suggested in recent times, the name 'signal station' given to the small, circular posts 75 years ago may be allowed to stand.' (Robertson 1973, 28–9). There is little here that today's archaeologist could quibble with – except, perhaps, the final comment as names are important and the wrong name conjures up the wrong image. Further, Robertson noted that the climate of opinion was changing. Just three years before Daniels had said, 'I hope presently to be able to demonstrate that the so-called Gask Ridge signal stations are in reality part of the late Domitianic frontier line' (Daniels 1970, 93). This was taken a step further ten years later when it was argued that they did indeed form part of a frontier (Breeze 1987, 235–6).

In his various publications on the Gask, Woolliscroft has challenged the view that the Gask towers formed a boundary. He noted the restrictive view of many of the towers to the north and their superb views over Strathearn, concluding that 'the tower crews watch[ed] routeways and likely trouble spots from a safe distance, as well as simply monitoring their own immediate environs' (Woolliscroft 1993, 294–302, especially 299–300). Woolliscroft and Hoffmann (2006, 225–234, and this volume) elaborated the earlier discussions, emphasising the role of the towers in controlling movement in Strathearn and Strathallan and, significantly, arguing that they formed part of the wider frontier zone between the Forth–Clyde isthmus and the Highland line.

Dobat (this volume) has now argued that they helped secure the safety of communication along a road in the frontier area. We now, therefore, have four possible interpretations.

- i Signal-stations conveying messages along the road.
- ii A frontier line.
- iii A line of towers to keep watch over the country to each side and forming part of a wider military frontier landscape.
- iv Protection for the movement of supplies along a road during the early years of occupation.

Can we decide between these possible interpretations? Do we need to decide between different interpretations? Might the line of towers have served more than one purpose? The closeness of the towers mitigates against their use for signalling along the road as such points are usually further apart. Dobat has put the case against the towers and fortlets serving as a frontier line, as

has done Woolliscroft, not least through comparing the Gask 'system' to an accepted frontier line, that in Germany. Woolliscroft's placing of the towers in the landscape helps to explain the somewhat unusual position of the towers were they to be watch-towers looking outwards from the province. Finally, we should note that towers were placed along other roads in the empire.

It is not easy to decide between the various interpretations because so often we tend to one argument or another as a result of our own prejudices. Some archaeologists believe in long-distance signalling, others seek the genesis of frontiers in the Gask towers. The Roman army might be seen by some as so powerful that it did not need to guard its communications by erected towers along trunk roads. We can, however, move to distance ourselves from our prejudices by consideration of the surviving archaeological remains within the framework of the literary and archaeological sources, a study of the towers in their landscape and an appreciation of the evidence from elsewhere in the Roman empire. This is what the organisers of the conference in Perth sought to do and in that they have been successful.

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