

# Agricola in the Highlands?

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## ABSTRACT

*The lack of place-names in Ptolemy's Geography north and west of the Great Glen suggests that Agricola did not penetrate into these areas. The location of the place-names in the territory of the Vacomagi suggests that he may have marched back from Mons Graupius through the Spey and Tay valleys.*

In a recent volume of the *Deeside Field* the late A A R Henderson suggested that we should consider the possibility that the battle of Mons Graupius took place north of Inverness in Sutherland or Caithness (Henderson 1984). His argument was based primarily upon the statements in the *Agricola* (30, 32 and 33; cf 27), in the speeches Tacitus put into the mouths of Calgacus and Agricola, that Mons Graupius was fought at the end of the island. This was supported by interpretation of other information. Mons Graupius ought to have been fought in the Highlands, which is where the Caledonians lived; the Boresti ought to have lived beyond Mons Graupius as they had not previously had contact with the Romans while their name may indicate that they were the people who lived at the end of the island; Agricola cannot simply have retraced his steps from Mons Graupius as he marched through the territory of new tribes and these tribes may have been those recorded by Ptolemy as living in the far north and west of the island. Henderson suggested that Agricola 'returned to the south of Scotland by the one major route through the Highlands, namely the Great Glen'. There is evidence, however, to suggest that Mons Graupius was not fought either north or west of the Great Glen.

Ptolemy published his *Geography* in the mid-second century (Rivet & Smith 1979, 103–47). When his co-ordinates are used to draw a map (illus 1), Britain north of the Solway Estuary is seen to be turned at right-angles to its true position. A convincing reason for this eastwards turning of north Britain through 90° has recently been suggested (Smith 1987, 47–8). This is that Ptolemy had determined that the absolute northern limit of the known world should be set at 63° N and thus Scotland had to be turned through 90° in order that it did not extend to 66° N, which is where the north point of the island would have lain if the map had been drawn correctly. Mann (1990) suggests that Ptolemy's determination of the northern limit of Britain related to the Greeks' belief that life was not possible north of that latitude, thus rendering the existence of land unnecessary. In the illustration and in the discussion below Ptolemy's map of north Britain has been realigned by turning it northwards through 90°.

There is general agreement that Agricola's campaigns – and presumably their aftermath – were Ptolemy's main source of information for geographical, tribal and place-names in north Britain.

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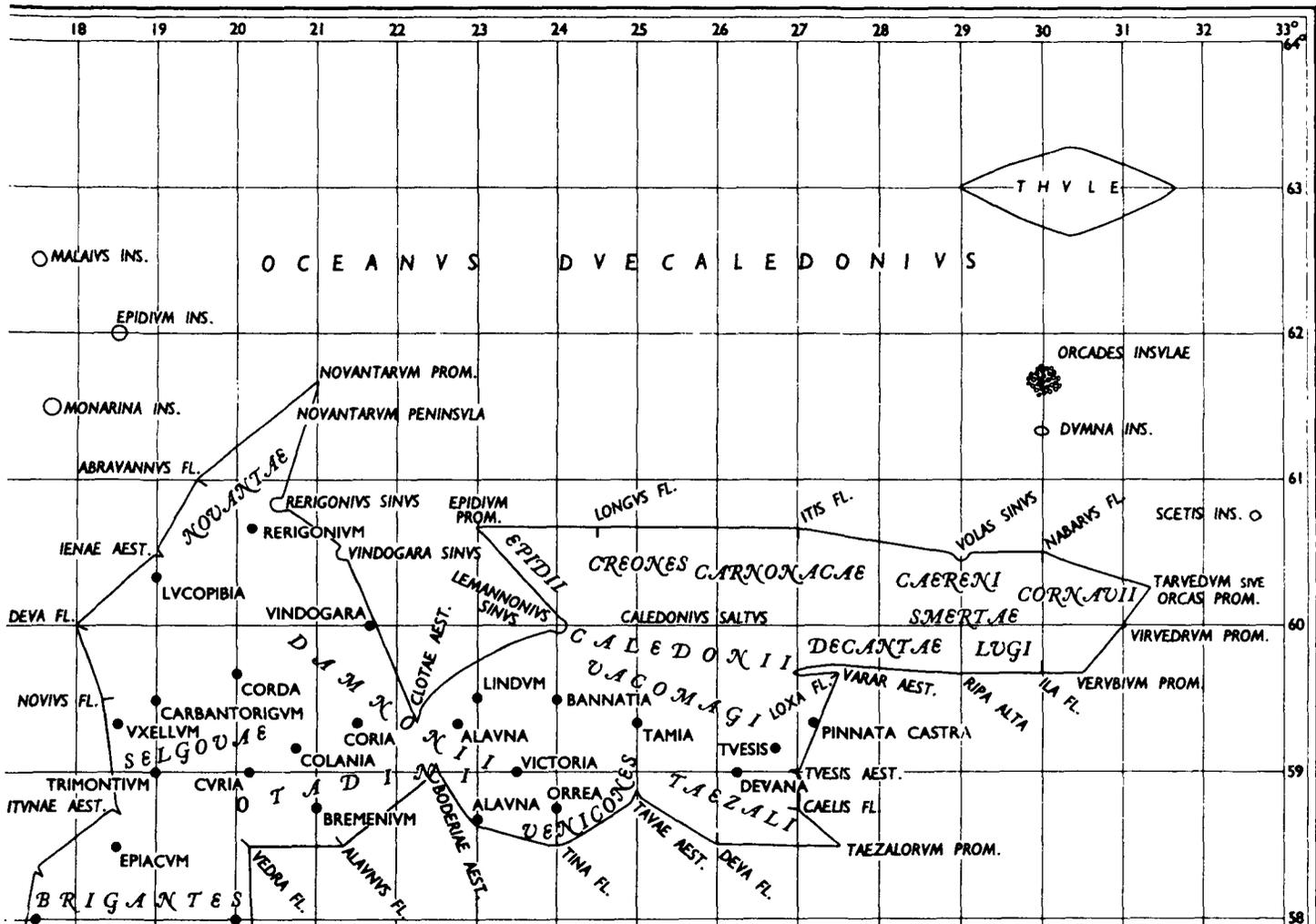
Indeed Smith (1987, 18) has argued that as Ptolemy did not list all the first-century forts north of the Tay then the 'map is wholly Agricolaan in origin. Perhaps recording Agricola's great achievement on his return to Rome', omitting the forts built under his successor. Sixteen tribes are named north of the Tyne-Solway isthmus, and their locations given.

Within the tribal territories south and east of the Great Glen at least one place-name is given within each tribal territory, and more often several. Some of these place-names are likely to have been native sites rather than Roman forts (Richmond 1958, 139; Mann & Breeze 1987). Some lie deep inland and must reflect information gathered by Agricola's army. They contrast with the geographical names, which are all coastal in distribution, and the tribal names north and west of the Great Glen, which also could all have been obtained as a result of maritime activity. Agricola's fleet is known to have sailed round Britain and is the most likely primary sources for these names, though Henderson argued that some tribal names could have been recorded by the army after Mons Graupius.

The lack of any place-names within, north and west of the Great Glen strongly suggests that this area was not penetrated by Agricola's army and that therefore Mons Graupius was not fought beyond Inverness. If Agricola had marched through this country it might be expected that at least one place-name would have found its way on to Ptolemy's map and to argue that such place-names had been recorded but subsequently lost is to push special pleading too far. The simplest solution is to assume that no known place-names means no army presence.

Ptolemy does record place-names inland, for example, in the territory of the Vacomagi. The location of this tribe has long caused problems. Two of their place-names, *Pinnata Castra* and *Tuesis*, Ptolemy locates on or near the Moray coast, while a third, *Bannatia*, appears to be in Strathmore. Watson (1926, 22) accepted that the tribe straddled the Mounth, but Richmond (1958, 142) rejected this, locating it in Strathmore. This was undoubtedly connected with his belief that *Pinnata Castra* 'ought to refer to Inchtuthil', a conclusion he had reached many years before (Richmond 1922, 299). Mann (1968, 307) and Rivet and Smith (1979, 128, 141, 485) reject this suggestion, firmly placing *Pinnata Castra* on the Moray coast. The place-name *Tuesis* is tied to the river *Tuesis*, normally regarded as the Spey: *Pinnata Castra* lies on the coast to the west. These two place-names locate at least part of the tribe in the lower reaches of the Spey.

Ptolemy lists four places within the territory of the Vacomagi (*Geography* II, 3, 8–9). We have already seen that *Pinnata Castra* lies on the coast west of the mouth of the Spey. The other three places, *Tuesis*, *Tameia* and *Bannatia*, lie inland. When the alignment of Scotland is righted by turning it through 90°, it becomes apparent that these three places lie along a north–north-east/south–south-west axis. The river Spey, the most substantial river cutting through the north Highlands, flows roughly north-east from its source. These lines are close enough to suggest that coincidence is not involved and that *Tuesis*, *Bannatia* and *Tameia* lie in Strathspey, and that this is the location of the tribe. Thus the Vacomagi can be pulled wholly north of (or into) the Grampians, leaving Strathmore to the Venicones (Rivet & Smith 1979, 141, 491) or the Caledones (Watson 1926, 21; Wainwright 1955, 52; Hind 1983, 375; Barrow 1989, 163). Interpreting Ptolemy's description of the Caledones as stretching from the Lemannonian Gulf on the west coast (probably Loch Long, Loch Fyne or Loch Linnhe) to the Varar estuary on the east (Beaully Firth) as indicating a distribution along the southern and eastern edges of the Highland massif (where the modern place-names of Dunkeld, Schiehallion and Rohallion occur), rather than through the Great Glen (Richmond 1958, 141; Rivet & Smith 1979, 141; 291), would entail their territory crossing that of the Vacomagi, as Hind (1984, 375) realized, but Barrow (1989, 163) ignored. Hind dealt with this problem by arguing that the Vacomagi, Taexali and Venicones were all part of a Caledonian grouping of tribes, placing greater weight on Tacitus's reference to the region known as Caledonia over Ptolemy's recording of the Caledones as a separate



ILLUS 1. Ptolemy's map of north Britain. (Based on the *Map of Roman Britain*, reproduced by kind permission of the Ordnance Survey)

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tribe. Mann (1974, 36; cf Mann & Breeze 1987, 90) accepted the difference in usage, arguing that the formerly powerful tribe of the Caledones had given its name to the country, rather as the otherwise obscure Graei had given their name to Greece, but had subsequently been pushed back into the Great Glen and possibly the upper glens (cf Richmond 1958, 142) by incomers – the Vacomagi, Venicones and Taexali – leaving relics of their former extent in the place-names of Dunkeld, Schiehallion and Rohallion an argument which Barrow (1989, 163) finds unbelievable. Clearly the problem of Caledonia and the Caledones has not yet been solved.

As Rivet and Smith note (1979, 141) it is impossible to reconcile the placing of the Vacomagi in Strathspey with the normal identification of *Bannatia* with Dalginross in Perthshire or their own suggested identification of *Tameia* with Cardean, or, we may now add, Maxwell's proposed identification of *Bannatia* with Bochastle and *Tameia* with Doune (Maxwell 1984, 221). The identification of *Bannatia* as Dalginross resulted from its position on Ptolemy's map and on its relationship to other places (Richmond 1922, 295). If, however, its location within the territory of the Vacomagi is regarded as paramount, then the identification with Dalginross cannot stand.

There is little point in speculation about the location of the places in the territory of the Vacomagi. No Roman forts are known to lie in Strathspey, but in any case it is more likely that these are native place-names. No large hillforts are known in Strathspey (cf Feachem 1966, 59–87, and end map) but there is no need for these place-names to refer to hillforts as opposed to other settlements. The name, *Pinnata Castra*, suggests a Roman place, but, if not Roman, Burghead must be the most likely candidate. Although no pre-Pictish material has been found there, a radiocarbon date of 260 ad, centred on AD 290 after calibration, may hint at pre-Pictish occupation (Edwards & Ralston 1978, 206–7).

The information about these places, wherever and whatever they were, presumably had been gathered by Agricola's army, the only Roman force known to have penetrated into north-east Scotland before the time of Ptolemy. This army must have either reconnoitred Strathspey, or perhaps even marched through it: Rivet and Smith (1979, 141) accept that Agricola must have invaded the territory of the Vacomagi.

Roman marching camps have been located in eastern Scotland (St Joseph 1973, 214–46; 1976, 1–28). Disagreement surrounds the date of some of these camps, but all known discoveries are restricted to the areas east of the Grampians: the valleys of Strathallan, Strathearn and Strathmore and the more broken country of Aberdeenshire. No camps are known within the Highland massif though it is not clear how far they have been sought (Frere 1980, 95). In any case these camps reflect no more than the state of today's knowledge. New camps are being found, almost on an annual basis, and new discoveries could considerably alter our appreciation of the location of the Roman campaigns. It might be argued that, so far as eastern Scotland is concerned, since the 18th century we have been doing no more than infilling the map whose outline was drawn by William Roy, for there are still only two or three camps known beyond his most northerly camp, Glenmailen or Ythan Walls (Roy 1793, pls I & LI; cf St Joseph 1977, 142, fig 11). Yet new discoveries in south-western Scotland, the forts and fortlets in the 1930s and 1940s and the camp at Girvan in 1976 (St Joseph 1976, 6–12; 1978, 387–400), have led to a radical re-appraisal of our view of the relationship between the Roman army and this area: the same could happen *vis-a-vis* the Highlands. Strathspey may be the best place to start the hunt for Roman marching camps in the Highlands.

Is it possible to determine whether Agricola's army merely reconnoitred the territory of the Vacomagi in Strathspey, presumably before Mons Graupius, or used it as a through route after the battle? The size of camps, if found, might help – so would sure knowledge of the site of the battle! There is, however a hint ready to hand.

After Mons Graupius Agricola led his army into the territory of the Boresti (*Agricola* 38). This

tribe must have lived by the coast because while there Agricola ordered his admiral to circumnavigate Britain. The army marched slowly back to winter quarters through the territory of new tribes. It seems not impossible that part of this route lay through Strathspey, one of the main routes into the Highlands from the north, the line of march continuing perhaps down Glen Garry and Strathtay, the army emerging from the Highlands at Dunkeld, near the (?later) site of the legionary fortress at Inchtuthil. It might be argued that the Roman army could not find its way around the Highlands, but that would be to ignore the geographical sophistication of the Romans and their use of intelligence in planning their route when on campaign (Breeze 1967, 14–15). Several sources refer to the use of merchants, travellers, refugees and other natives, prisoners, deserters and reconnaissance parties to gather intelligence. Agricola certainly reconnoitred and used merchants, refugees and prisoners to gain intelligence (*Agricola* 20, 24 & 25). Moreover, the Highlands were not *terra incognita* to the natives. People had lived in the area for several thousand years; routes will have been known and the Romans could easily have gathered information about these routes. There is no reason to believe that the Romans would have experienced any greater difficulty finding their way round the Highlands of Scotland than any other hostile part of the world.

The location of Mons Graupius at either the Pass of Grange (Ogilvie & Richmond 1967, 65) or the Culloden area (Breeze 1982, 50) would suit this interpretation. A battle at either site would have allowed Agricola subsequently to move into the lands of the Boresti, who would accordingly be placed on the Moray coast, and then march through the territory of new tribes, in Strathspey and the Highland massif.

In summary, it is suggested that Agricola may have marched back from Mons Graupius through the Highlands, utilizing the Spey and Tay valleys, and that Roman marching camps might with profit be sought there.

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