

## II: The Romans and Ireland again

### Some Thoughts on Tacitus' *Agricola* Chapter 24

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Chapter 24 of Tacitus' *Agricola* is an account of the fifth season of the great general's campaigns in Britain. The consensus of scholars has been that Tacitus is describing a Roman campaign in south-west Scotland. This paper re-interprets the text to refer to an exploratory invasion of Ireland, possibly mounted from Chester, and argues that this is more logical within the overall narrative of the *Agricola* and fits into the broader pattern of Roman ambitions in Britain at the time.

#### Introduction

Exactly one hundred years ago a robust exchange of views was taking place in the pages of the *Classical Review*. The protagonists were Francis Haverfield, one of the most distinguished early members of the Chester Archaeological Society, and Professor Alfred Gudeman. The topic which engaged their passions was the possibility that the Roman army had invaded Ireland in the first century AD (Haverfield 1899; Gudeman 1900). The consensus of scholarly opinion at the time supported Haverfield in denying a Roman invasion, and a few years later he felt confident enough to go further, writing dismissively of any significant Roman contact with Ireland at all (Haverfield 1913). A good synopsis of the debate in the earlier years of the century is given by Killeen (1976, 213–15). As the years went by, the ideas which Haverfield had put forward were increasingly accepted without question, changing in the process from a point of view to a known fact. For example, Peter Salway in the Oxford History of England volume on Roman Britain epitomised the work of three generations of scholars by expressing what had now become the orthodox view succinctly and without discussion: it is clear that he felt that there was nothing for him to discuss (Salway 1981, 145). After all, every schoolboy knows that the Romans never went to Ireland...

It is not unfair to say that for a great many years anyone attempting to raise the possibility of a Roman invasion of Ireland has been liable to be exiled, along with the believers in ley lines, to the lunatic fringes of archaeology. Richard Warner at the Ulster Museum has ploughed a very lonely furrow in trying to re-open the debate, basing his theories on both archaeological and literary evidence (eg Warner 1995). His work has been largely ignored on this side of the Irish Sea and dismissed in his own country. Yet there is no less evidence for a Roman invasion of Ireland than there is for many other actions which archaeologists and historians have sought to attribute to the Romans in Britain: the real or imaginary

events of the years AD 154–5 and 197, for example, come to mind as the source of countless theories and arguments based on very slender foundations. Furthermore, a far greater body of Roman archaeological material found in Ireland is available to us today than was suspected at the time of Haverfield and Gudeman (Warner *art cit*). This, however, is to stray into a wider topic; it is not intended here to discuss the Roman impact on — or even some form of presence in — Ireland in the first four centuries AD, but to focus on the possibility of an invasion in the early 80s.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the Roman historian Tacitus in his description of Agricola's campaigns gives us several strong clues that a Roman expedition to Ireland did in fact take place. Some of the points have already been made in the long-forgotten debate referred to earlier (Gudeman 1900) but they deserve to be re-examined by a new audience and from a modern historical and archaeological perspective. Admittedly there is no proof that there was an invasion, but there is sufficient circumstantial evidence to make it a serious topic worthy of historians' attention. To maintain that there is nothing to discuss is simply untenable.

### **The historical context**

The conclusion of the Civil War of 69 and the accession of Vespasian seems to have revived the Romans' interest in Britain after an indecisive period of almost ten years following the great rebellion of Boudicca. There can be little doubt that conquest, probably total conquest, was now the objective; the motive is less clear but must surely have been at least in part political. The new Flavian dynasty had no legitimate claim to rule and therefore needed to prove itself both to the Senate and the army. Britain was a province where there was ample scope for Vespasian and his sons to make a show of the new regime's military prowess. To return to the Romans' purpose; if we accept the concept of 'total conquest' as their objective, what did 'total' mean to them? And where precisely was the new territory the army was intended to conquer? The answer is perhaps not so straightforward as most writers on Roman Britain would have us believe, and this will be discussed later.

The Flavian campaigns of conquests in Britain took thirteen years (AD 71–84) and the efforts of three governors. Quintus Petillius Cerialis campaigned in northern England, certainly as far as Carlisle; his successor Sextus Julius Frontinus completed the conquest of Wales; and Gnaeus Julius Agricola, who arrived in Britain in 77, took his armies deep into the heart of the Scottish Highlands, culminating in the great victory at Mons Graupius in 83. (An alternative chronology would place Agricola's arrival in 78 and Mons Graupius in 84 (Maxwell 1990, 10)). Although our knowledge of these events is now supplemented by archaeology, the substance of it still comes from Tacitus' account of the life of Agricola, who was fortunate to have the historian for his son-in-law. The *Agricola* is one of the best known biographies to have survived from the ancient world. Unfortunately for our purposes it is not easy to understand: Tacitus' style is at once elliptical and theatrical, and often the ring of his words, exquisitely crafted and polished for effect, obscures the simple clarity of sense which we so desperately want.

His biography of his father-in-law contains descriptions for each of Agricola's campaigning seasons beginning in the year 77 (or 78) when Frontinus' conquest of North Wales was

completed. The second season saw the Roman armies consolidating earlier campaigns in the north of England, reaching the area where forty years later Hadrian's Wall would be built. The third season marked a great leap forward to the Clyde–Forth line; the fourth saw the Romans consolidating their recent conquests with fort-building across the northern isthmus. Tacitus hints strongly that this was the limit of Roman ambitions (*Agricola*, 23). The fifth season will be discussed below. The sixth season renewed the offensive against the Britons north of the Clyde–Forth line and led directly to the campaign of the seventh season, when the Britons were finally brought to battle and defeated somewhere in the eastern or northern foothills of the Grampians.

### **Agricola chapter 24: the fifth season**

This chapter of the *Agricola*, which includes the general's famous comment that he could have conquered Ireland with a single legion and a few auxiliaries, is arguably the single most important source for any discussion of the Romans' knowledge of that island. (The Latin text and a translation are appended to this paper). We have already seen that it is a commonplace amongst scholars that the Roman army never crossed the sea to Ireland. They are agreed that the meaning of this chapter is relatively straightforward: although Agricola may have thought about Ireland and talked about it, he never actually went there. By contrast, the purpose of this paper is to suggest that we should be seriously considering the possibility that what is being described in the fifth year of Agricola's governorship is a Roman military expedition to Ireland. However one chooses to interpret it, there are a number of problems with chapter 24: text, sense and the logic of the narrative are all obscure, certainly in comparison with the two chapters which precede and follow it. Although these issues are all closely interconnected, I will attempt to discuss them as a series of topics.

### **Agricola and south-west Scotland**

The majority of commentators have expressed their general unease with the opening words of chapter 24. There are a number of reasons for this, related to both the sense and the reliability of the text in the form in which it is usually printed. For the time being let us accept that some words are likely to be corrupt and move to consider the sense of those parts of the beginning of the chapter which seem reasonably certain. Tacitus' words imply a move forward outside territory already controlled by Rome (but note that no direction is mentioned), and are quite specific in saying that tribes 'unknown until that time' were brought to battle. What was the direction of this advance? His next paragraph, chapter 25, quite clearly refers to a move northwards beyond the Forth–Clyde line in the sixth season; logically this follows on from the halt at the isthmus at the end of the fourth season described in chapter 23. This leaves us at a loss to locate the campaign so obliquely described in chapter 24.

If the fifth season's campaign was north of the isthmus it seems unlikely that Tacitus would have expressed himself in quite the way that he does to describe two campaigns, the fourth and the fifth, which would then have taken place in roughly the same area, and in consecutive seasons. The end of chapter 23 is too much of a full stop. Commentators have perceived the difficulty and evaded it by postulating a campaign in the fifth season in a different direction, to the south of the Forth–Clyde line in an area that had been bypassed in the headlong rush to the north. The consensus is that the area in question was south-west

Scotland, the land lying west of the Roman route leading from Carlisle to the Clyde (for example see Hanson 1987, 93–6 and especially his reservations on page 94; he still ultimately accepts that the fifth season was spent in south-west Scotland. For another point of view, with a good resumé of the difficulties with this passage, see Reed 1971, who, for example, points out that chapter 23 says that ‘all the land this side of the isthmus was held’ at the end of the fourth season. Ultimately, however, he still accepts the conventional view: ‘that part which faces Ireland... can only be Galloway’ (Reed 1971, 146) ). If south-west Scotland is correct, one might reasonably ask what sort of general would have left untouched a vast area so close to his left flank and, worse still, had not troubled to find out what tribes were living there for at least two seasons. What had Agricola and his generals been doing in the fourth season? The conventional view would have us believe that Tacitus is saying, in effect, that Agricola was incompetent. This surely cannot be right.

Such a conclusion provides the opportunity to make a general point about several of the interpretations which have been made concerning this chapter of the *Agricola*. Whereas in the modern world we are clutching at every slender scrap of evidence in our attempts to reconstruct the Roman history of Britain at the end of the first century, the *Agricola* was written at a time — and for an audience — which must have known perfectly well what had happened in this remote province, at least in broad outline. More particularly there must have been people in Tacitus’ potential audience who had actually been in Britain at the time described in his narrative: legionary commanders and tribunes are an obvious example. It is surely reasonable to make two assumptions from this: firstly, that what Tacitus tells us must represent a version of events near enough to the known truth to prevent his listeners from either laughing out loud or spluttering in rage at a blatant falsehood; and secondly that Tacitus will put the actions and motives of Agricola in the best possible light within the constraints of the facts already known to his Roman audience. We should therefore examine any interpretations we put forward to see if they fit these criteria. In my view the south-west Scotland theory does not pass this test. As we have seen, it shows Agricola’s generalship in a bad light, and there is no attempt by Tacitus to disguise or gloss over what would have been a major strategic error. Therefore the mistake must be ours, or rather in our understanding of Tacitus’ words. He cannot be describing events in south-west Scotland.

There is another reason why we should question the accepted geography of the fifth season. Although I do not believe that it has ever been explicitly stated, there seems to have been a tacit assumption that Agricola was making his plans for the fifth season from a headquarters somewhere in central Scotland. From such a viewpoint the ‘shore facing Ireland’ is quite reasonably south-west Scotland. Yet it is generally agreed that a governor would return to his administrative duties at the end of each campaigning season. We should therefore expect to find Agricola at Colchester or London for the winter between the fourth and fifth seasons (Reed 1971, 143). If he chose to go campaigning in the fifth year, then the whole of the province was his canvas. In particular, the expression ‘*eamque partem Britanniae quae Hiberniam aspicit*’, looked at from the south-east corner of the province, could refer to anywhere from the coast of Pembrokeshire northwards. There is no reason to think that the Romans’ perspective of Ireland, viewed from their administrative centre in south-east England, was any different than it has been at other periods.

The most obvious ‘shore facing Ireland’ is the arc between Anglesey in the west and Morecambe Bay in the north, and historically the centre of that arc has been Chester.

To sum up, there is nothing in the words of chapter 24 to link the events described there with south-west Scotland, or to say that these events had any geographical connection with the front line established at the end of the fourth season.

### **The sweep to the north: masterplan or second option?**

The insidious and beguiling prose of Tacitus has had its effect on scholars, who have generally accepted the storyline which he gives us, portraying Agricola’s campaigns in Britain as an almost predestined march towards Mons Graupius. They are thus forced to view chapter 24 in general as an aside, and yet their interpretation of undeniably difficult parts of the text is coloured by an underlying conviction that the sense of the words in question cannot have made too much of a diversion from the main story. This is perhaps understandable since it was clearly part of Tacitus’ dramatic objective in writing the *Agricola* to give a certain sense of inexorable inevitability to his father-in-law’s work. But this does not mean that real life was so linear. Roman objectives at the beginning of Agricola’s governorship may have been very different to what they became later. The overall plan may have been modified by circumstances and expediency, or the dictates of the emperor. We should be wary, therefore, that we are not assuming that any difficult passage has to be as closely related as we can possibly make it to what Tacitus has chosen to portray as Agricola’s Holy Grail.

So far we have looked at the geographical assumptions which are commonly made about this chapter. There is another, less obvious, assumption inherent in the standard interpretation. Only in recent years have reservations about the scale of Agricola’s achievements been expressed, based both on the study of the text of the *Agricola* itself and the more precise archaeological information from Flavian sites in northern Britain which is now coming to light (*see* Hanson 1987, 174–88). With our increased perception of the progress made by the Roman army in northern Britain before Agricola’s governorship, his accomplishments during his double term in Britain can now be judged as impressive rather than spectacular. Incidentally, he also seems to have been a lot less busy than was previously assumed. If we accept that the halo of an Alexander or a Caesar no longer fits Agricola, perhaps we should begin to contemplate the possibility that on some occasions he was also less than successful. How would we expect Tacitus to deal with such an eventuality? As has been mentioned already, any failure would almost certainly have been public knowledge. The incident would have to be alluded to in some way, and shown in the most favourable yet credible light. After all, we know that Tacitus was the master of innuendo and ambiguity.

Is there then some failed enterprise of Agricola’s lurking in the first part of chapter 24, and what might the failure have been? Does this give us any help in deciding where the events of the fifth season took place? One possibility has been mentioned above — an advance beyond the Forth–Clyde line. Perhaps a campaign frustrated by frequent clashes with guerrillas — *crebris proeliis* — which kept the Romans busy but achieved little. But then we are forced to explain away Tacitus’ fairly clear description of events of the

previous year with its strong hint of an end to Roman ambitions. Why did the Roman steamroller so clearly come to a deliberate halt at the end of the fourth season, only to begin advancing again in the spring of the fifth season as if no halt had ever been intended? It is true that a *deus ex machina* in the form of new instructions received from Titus (or Domitian, if the ‘late’ chronology is preferred) over the winter is possible, but this comes very close to special pleading. On the other hand, if we discount chapter 24 totally, the narrative resumes the attack on the Britons of the north in the sixth season, leaving a gap of approximately eighteen months from the end of the fourth season. This gives a much more comfortable period in which the Romans could have reconsidered their overall objectives in Britain.

The sense for this chapter which I would like to propose was hinted at in a sentence used by Reed (1971, 146) although he does not explore the implications of his own words. There has been almost universal agreement that there is no logical connection between the two parts of the long first sentence centred on... *proeliis domuit;eamque partem Britanniae...* and this is emphasised by the use of a semicolon after *domuit* in the printed texts. The *-que* is seen as no more than a strictly temporal term, merely adding another activity to the list of Agricolan activities in the fifth season. If we return to Reed’s words, he describes the phrase *eamque partem Britanniae* thus: ‘the use of the conjunction *-que* to connect two separate campaigns need not worry us... and here need imply no more than that one action was subsequent to another’. While Reed’s use of the word ‘campaigns’ seems too definite — it is difficult to make a ‘campaign’ out of *copiis instruxit* — his choice of words in fact brings to the forefront the very issue he tries to dismiss. Of course the use of *-que* to connect two separate campaigns should worry us. In any normal sentence the *-que* tells us that what goes before is in some way linked with what comes after. In this instance there is no dispute about what comes after the *-que*: it is Ireland. In fact, the rest of the chapter is about Ireland. Therefore it would not be at all surprising if what comes before *-que* also relates to Ireland. Maybe there were not two separate ‘campaigns’: maybe the whole of the fifth season was concerned with Ireland.

Let us assume for the sake of argument that Agricola at the end of the fourth season had finished the job, the conquest of Britain — *inventus in ipsa Britannia terminus*. This ringing phrase is surely significant. After all, the mountains of highland Scotland must have seemed to present the Romans with all the difficulties they had experienced in north-western Spain several generations before, and with no prospect of any profit to offset the considerable effort. What next? Given the shaky geographical knowledge which is revealed in chapter 24, with Ireland lying between Britain and Spain, why should an expedition to Ireland not have been attempted? It would certainly tidy up the north-western corner of the empire, leaving outside its boundaries only those bits not worth having. This interpretation also gives a clearer sense to *ipsa Britannia* at the end of the preceding chapter: what had been found was an end to Roman aspirations within the confines of Britain *strictu sensu*, ie the land mass of England, Wales and Scotland — but not necessarily in other directions.

A glance at a modern map will show that Ireland plus Britain south of the Forth–Clyde line makes a logical unit of territory. Agricola was in a position to appreciate this: he was a British specialist. There is no reason to believe that Ireland was any less known to the

Romans than highland Scotland (in fact, from Ptolemy's *Geography*, compiled only a short while after the events of chapter 24, it appears that it was much better known). Ireland would surely have seemed a more attractive target than highland Scotland, both economically and strategically. We should perhaps consider whether this was the original Flavian masterplan for their British conquests. The date for the fifth campaign is crucial here; if we accept the 'early' version of Agricola's governorship (77–83), the fifth season would fall in 81, the last year of Titus' life. It is then possible to make an interesting speculation about what Agricola's orders from Rome may have been. Was Titus' instruction to Agricola the conquest of a 'short' Britain plus Ireland? And was the plan changed on his death in September 81, when Domitian decided to abandon the Irish scheme and turn instead to the conquest of the whole of the main island?

### **A Roman expedition to Ireland?**

There is no dispute that the majority of chapter 24 is concerned exclusively with Ireland. If we can in some way reconcile the first part of the chapter to the Irish topic we shall have resolved a number of difficulties with the current orthodox understanding of the whole passage. Let us assume for the sake of argument that the first words of the chapter allude to *crebris ac prosperis proeliis* in Ireland. If that were the case, the gap between the halt on the isthmus at the end of the fourth season and the campaigns in the north in the sixth become much more intelligible: the Roman juggernaut had veered to the west in the intervening period, but not just on a mopping-up operation of some previously missed Galloway hillsmen (surely never a very likely scenario for a large provincial army), but rather a marine expedition into Ireland which would bring greater glory to the emperor and his general, bringing the armies of Rome face to face with *ignotas ad id tempus gentes*. There is now a valid reason for them being *ignotas*.

We may imagine that what took place had something of the nature of Caesar's expeditions into Britain. If the expedition had been a great success with lasting benefits to Rome we surely would have heard more about it. There are various possibilities. Perhaps it was a *blitzkrieg* raid to test the mettle of the Irish tribes. It need not have been a disaster, but something less than an unqualified success. Perhaps resistance was unexpectedly strong and the Romans found they had stirred up a hornet's nest in *crebris proeliis*. On the other hand, this may be doing Agricola an injustice: the expedition may have had a limited objective and been closely related to extricating the native prince who is mentioned later in the chapter — perhaps a repeat performance of the rescue of Cartimandua from her rebellious tribesmen a few years earlier. Or was there an expedition which was the forerunner of something far more purposeful, a full scale invasion which never happened? There is nothing particularly unusual in any of these options: this was the normal way for the Roman empire and particularly the Roman army to deal with tribes beyond the frontier. A fourth possibility is that Agricola had acted *ultra vires*. He had moved outside his province and had been ordered to break off his Irish adventure by the emperor. Depending on the personality and paranoia of the particular emperor such an action could prove to be a life-threatening mistake for a governor to make; if this is the right explanation here the offence must have been considered not too great since Agricola remained in Britain, but the incident would also give an interesting insight into the scope of Flavian objectives: they were indeed confined to *Britannia ipsa*. Note that all of these explanations fulfill the

criteria mentioned earlier of events that would have been known in Rome, but which are portrayed in a way which is not damaging to Agricola.

If we start to look at other parts of chapter 24 to see if they will support our thesis, there is one phrase, *copiis instruxit in spem magis quam ob formidinem*, which is a striking one. But what does it mean? The expression does not seem to have been discussed in any detail. Assuming the normal interpretation of the whole of our chapter and taking *copiis instruxit* at its face value, it gives us a picture of Agricola re-enacting Caligula's antics on the Channel shore in AD 41: a Roman general lining up his troops on the coast facing hostile unknown territory 'in anticipation'. Is this really a very likely scenario, and would it reflect any credit on Agricola if it were true? It must refer to one of two possibilities. If it is the fortification of the 'shore facing Ireland' (where that might have been has been mentioned earlier), then there is a serious challenge to archaeologists to find the fortifications, and a problem for historians in finding a motive and a parallel for building them. Are we to credit Agricola with inventing a western Saxon Shore system? This is surely nonsense. Another possibility is serious preparations by the Romans for an invasion of Ireland. This, too, is difficult to understand if it happened in isolation and nothing came of the troops being drawn up on the shore. If we apply our test of representing Agricola in the best light he does not emerge well from it, in fact he looks rather foolish. Why would Tacitus have mentioned it? A discreet silence might have served better.

Interpretation becomes easier if we accept the possibility that Agricola's earlier *crebris ac prosperis proeliis* had been in Ireland. Now we have provided a reason for Agricola's actions in *copiis instruxit*, and the link provided by *eamque partem* becomes natural and logical. Perhaps more importantly, it is now easier to suggest a reason why Tacitus should have chosen to bring *formido* into his narrative. The use of this word appears to have passed without comment, even though a moment's reflection will show that it introduces a negative view of Agricola's actions into the story which is not apparently necessary. On the conventional view of this passage the sense we might expect here from Tacitus would be 'he drew up his forces in the hope of a favourable opportunity for an invasion of...' or something similar. Why bring something so damning to Agricola as *formido* into the story? Are we to believe that Tacitus' well-known love of verbal contrasts has beguiled him into balancing fear with hope, and thereby suggesting obliquely that our hero could have been so flawed as to be afraid?

There is a way out of this difficulty. Let us imagine again that Agricola had actually been to Ireland and had found the tribes there numerous and well organised. We do not even have to postulate that things did not go too well over there since we do not know his objectives. Upon his return he kept his troops close to the shore. They were there prepared either for another raid or a full-scale invasion in the next season (the possibility of a change of Roman strategy under Domitian which would have put a stop to this has already been mentioned). At the very least he prudently disposed his forces to ward off any retaliatory raids, as a good general would. This disposition would have been general knowledge to Tacitus' potential audience *via* officers and men who had served in Britain. The fact that it led to nothing may have been portrayed by those who were hostile to him as a weakening of resolve on Agricola's part. Could it be that the hawks

amongst his staff were all for a further invasion while Agricola, perhaps on the emperor's instruction, would have none of it? If a rumour of Agricola's *formido* was already in the minds of the writer's audience, it would be difficult to avoid mentioning it; but Tacitus has added the gloss that Agricola's actions were preparations for a second attempt.

This may be an appropriate moment to introduce into the argument the native (Irish) prince who is mentioned towards the end of chapter 24. It was of course a common feature of Roman diplomacy, if that is the right word, to hold a member of the royal family of a tribe beyond the frontiers *in occasionem* — 'with an eye to a favourable opportunity' for Roman intervention. In the context of Roman dealings with the Britons this path was followed by both Caesar and Claudius. The verbs which Tacitus uses for describing Agricola's dealing with this unknown prince are worth closer scrutiny. Firstly *'retinebat'* — 'he was holding him (over a period of time)'; the tense is imperfect, so perhaps we should envisage the *spes* which induced Agricola to draw up his forces lasting some time. More important is the other verb: 'Agricola *exceperat* one of the princelings...'. The tense is pluperfect, the verb *excipere* means 'to take out'. So Agricola *had taken out* (*sc* of Ireland) one of the princelings. If we are sure that we know that Agricola never went to Ireland we are forced to translate the verb as 'had received', or 'had him taken out' or something similar, but this is abusing the Latin; the normal meaning of *excipere* makes perfectly good sense if Agricola had been to Ireland and had brought the prince back with him.

Tacitus' description of Agricola's remarks about conquering Ireland with a single legion are universally taken at face value as a simple, if faulty, hypothetical calculation. Is Tacitus ever so transparent? Are we not listening to the wistful voice of an old man who had actually set foot on Irish soil, who regretted not having had the chance to finish something he had started? The words which Tacitus heard so often might have been on the lines of 'I just know that we could have conquered the whole island if only ...'. The Latin of the last sentence of the chapter does not have to be forced to be read in this way, as a reference to a real opportunity lost rather than the theories of an old man fantasising in his cups. The usual Roman 'softening up' process had begun in Ireland, but for some reason had not resulted in a serious invasion and subsequent conquest. As a final point, there may be some modern miscalculation, if not *hubris*, in dismissing Agricola's estimate as too low. We do not really know enough about Ireland at this period to make a judgement, but Agricola was on the spot, in time and quite possibly in place. He should have known what he was talking about. It is worth bearing in mind that scholars have no problem accepting Agricola's settlement of Roman Scotland after Mons Graupius with an identical garrison of one legion and a 'reasonable number' of auxiliaries. One perhaps might speculate whether these were the destined garrison of Ireland diverted to another task...

If the reader is prepared to accept the theory that there was a change of plan upon the death of Domitian which put an end to an 'Irish project', that part of chapter 24 which describes Ireland's potential role as a significant part of the empire (*valentissimam...*) takes on a precise meaning which it otherwise lacks. It is a very Tacitean reminder of why the Irish project was a good idea, for the benefit of those of his audience who must already have known about it and perhaps been a part of it, and a veiled criticism of Domitian for

abandoning it. Those in Rome who were hostile to Domitian would have been smugly aware of the rapid collapse of his Scottish conquests.

### The text

Can the text at the beginning of chapter 24 be reconciled to the Irish theme of what follows? Perhaps it can. Many commentators have sensed that something is not quite right with the first few words and have suggested that a place name has been corrupted to *nave prima* (see, for example, Ogilvie and Richmond, but also Reed 1971 *contra*). Their reasoning is that the word *transgressus* has no meaning (or at least no impact) without an object. While grammatically an object is not strictly necessary the sense is certainly very weak as the text stands unless one takes this sentence as following directly onto the end of chapter 23 and its meaning as *transgressus (in aliam insulam)*. The problem with this understanding of the phrase has already been referred to above; making Agricola cross the Clyde or Forth would make the beginning of chapter 25 something of an anticlimax, and the rest of chapter 24 a rambling aside. This is not Tacitus' style.

Note that Ogilvie and Richmond were looking for a river name in *nave prima*; they would not contemplate a crossing of the sea, because the implications were unacceptable to them. Their notes should be read as a perfect example of how a text can be interpreted to fit a pre-formed conclusion and forced to fit it (Ogilvie & Richmond eds 1967, 235–6). They did not even feel the need to introduce the idea of an Agricolan expedition to the west in order to subsequently disprove it. Once again, every schoolboy knows that the Romans never went to Ireland...

To return to the text: it is possible that the corruption extends further than *nave prima*. *Anno nave prima* is an uncomfortable combination of sounds, and it may not be what Tacitus wrote. Of course it can be argued that *anno* is essential to go with *quinto* but this begs the question about the accuracy of *expeditionum*. Why is this word plural? It is not normally so used and gives a rather strange sense in this form. If there is a corruption at this point there are several possibilities: firstly that *expeditionum* is completely corrupt and conceals another word altogether, or that the chapter originally began *Quinta expeditione* and that the genitive plural was a subsequent emendation by a scribe as a gloss on the following word *anno* which he found in an already corrupt manuscript; or that *nave prima* is the only corruption.

Accepting that *transgressus* really needs an object, a minimal emendation produces startling results: *Quinto expeditionum anno mare primus transgressus* 'in the fifth year of campaigning he was the first (sc Roman) to cross the sea and...'. More serious alterations might look for a place name in *expeditionum anno nave prima*: for example '*quinta expeditione \*mona/\*manavia mare primus transgressus...*'. We do not know what name might have been given to the sea between England and Ireland, but since Anglesey had been known to the Romans for at least twenty years and it was probably the most westerly point they had reached, it is not implausible that the name was 'the sea of Anglesey', however that may have been expressed in Latin. Agricola's *transgressus* was over water — open sea — and it brought him into contact with tribes which until that time were unknown; the crossing had nothing to do with the north. Only two destinations fit: the Isle

of Man or Ireland, and the subsequent references to Ireland in this chapter of the *Agricola* surely make it the favourite location for this campaign.

Two final thoughts on the text which are not directly related to the arguments made here, but make the passage more easy to understand. Firstly, research in Ireland has made it clear that Roman influence was strongest in the centre of the country. Perhaps this fact may lie behind the acknowledged textual corruptions in line 9. Should we read *haud multum a Britannia differunt in medio (sc Hiberniae)*? Secondly, the conventional text reads... *magis quam ob formidinem, si quidem Hibernia...* The comma awkwardly connects what *Agricola* was doing with an analysis of Ireland's geographical and strategic position. If the comma is replaced with a full stop a more forceful sentence appears which roundly declares that it was a mistake not to add the island to the empire.

### **Conclusion**

The words at the beginning of chapter 24 could have been written for another Roman general who braved the Ocean and *transgressus ignotas ad id tempus gentes crebris ac prosperis proeliis domuit*. This would not be a bad description of Caesar's first expedition to Britain, which may fairly be described as a probing raid with no permanent result. If we did not have Caesar's own words we should never know it had happened: there is not a trace of the event in the archaeological record. We should therefore not be too ready to dismiss the thought that Tacitus' words in chapter 24 may refer to another such expedition which made no lasting impact — an expedition to Ireland in the fifth year of his father-in-law's governorship.

I believe that chapter 24 can be most easily read and understood as a brief description of a Roman military flirtation with Ireland, with a hidden subtext of a planned all-out invasion which never took place. Once this is accepted the chapter gains a clear and meaningful place in Tacitus' narrative and apologies are no longer needed for it being a literary excursus. While minimal alterations to the text are required to make the sense which I should like perfectly clear, if obscurity is acceptable even *nave prima* may remain. The translation given below departs very little from the standard Latin text. It is in the nature of Tacitus' writing style that he gives us very little help, but I hope that I have demonstrated that there are a number of clues in this chapter if we look for them. The real issue is not with the text, but rather with what we want the passage to mean, how we choose to understand the words which we are given, and how open our minds are to the unthinkable. When Irish raids on the Romano-British coast are accepted as historical fact, why has it become unthinkable that there was no traffic in the other direction? The surprise would be if there were not. This paper began with a reference to the scholars of a century ago when the relationship between the Romans and Ireland was a subject for serious discussion. It will have served its purpose if it becomes so again.

Although strictly outside the scope of this paper, it may be worth mentioning that its appearance in a Chester journal is not entirely accidental. The author and a number of colleagues, of whom Keith Matthews of Chester Archaeology deserves particular mention, have had many long discussions about the origins of Roman Chester and its purpose and have reached the conclusion that there is a possibility that it may have some connection

with Roman aspirations, if not actual activity, in Ireland. The well-publicised — but still unpublished — discoveries of Roman material at Drumanagh north of Dublin (*Sunday Times* 21 January 1996) gave an added impetus to the debate, in that they refocussed the attention of Roman scholars on the historically normal route between Britain and Ireland rather than the south-west Scotland–Ulster route favoured by the students of Tacitus. As has already been stated, ‘the shore facing Ireland’ has at all other periods been Liverpool Bay and Chester in particular. This may well have some relevance to Agricola’s *copiis instruxit* in chapter 24. The well-documented links, not always peaceful, between Chester and Ireland in Viking and medieval times may be a continuation of something which had its origins in the Roman period. It is hoped to produce a paper which enlarges on this subject in the future.

## Appendix: the Latin text

Quinto expeditionum anno nave prima transgressus ignotas ad id tempus gentes crebris simul ac prosperis proeliis domuit; eamque partem Britanniae quae Hiberniam aspicit copiis instruxit, in spem magis quam ob formidinem, si quidem Hibernia medio inter Britanniam et Hispaniam sita et Gallico quoque mari opportuna valentissimam imperii partem magnis in vicem usibus miscuerit. Spatium eius, si Britanniae comparetur, angustius nostri maris insulas superat. Solum caelumque et ingenia cultusque hominum haud multum a Britannia differunt; in melius (corrupt) aditus portusque per commercia et negotiatores cogniti. Agricola expulsus seditione domestica unum ex regulis gentis exceperat ac specie amicitiae in occasionem retinebat. Saepe ex eo audivi legione una et modicis auxiliis debellari obtinerique Hiberniam posse; idque etiam adversus Britanniam profuturum, si Romana ubique arma et velut e conspectu libertas tolleretur.

### *Conventional translation*

In the fifth year of campaigning Agricola crossed in the first ship and conquered tribes until that time unknown in a series of quick successful battles, and he drew up his forces along that part of Britain which looks towards Ireland, in hope rather than in fear, if indeed it is true that Ireland is situated between Britain and Spain and is conveniently placed for the Gallic Sea and could, by uniting the strongest part of our empire, be of considerable use to us. The size of Ireland is small if compared to Britain but exceeds the islands of the Mediterranean. The landscape and climate are not much different from Britain’s, as are the appearance and customs of its people... (corrupt)... the approaches and harbours are known to us by trade and the activities of our entrepreneurs. Agricola received one of the minor princes who had been expelled by a family feud and kept him with him with the appearance of friendship but with an eye to opportunity. I have often heard Agricola say that Ireland could be conquered and garrisoned with a single legion and a few auxiliaries; and that it would serve as a useful tool against Britain if Roman arms were on every side and the prospect of freedom was as it were removed from sight.

### *Proposed translation*

In the fifth year of campaigning he became the first (Roman general) to cross the Sea of Anglesey (to Ireland) and conquer tribes which were unknown to us up till then in a series of sharp successful engagements. He also disposed troops in that part of Britain which faces Ireland; his motive was anticipation of a further invasion rather than defense. If it is true that Ireland lies between Britain and Spain and is handily situated by the Gallic Sea, the island would have united the strongest part of our empire and would likely as not have provided great profit to us. It is not as wide as Britain but it is larger than the islands of the Mediterranean. The countryside, the climate, the habits and appearance of the natives — none of these are much different to Britain, at least in the central part. The

approaches to its harbours are well known to us thanks to trading posts and the activities of our entrepreneurs. Agricola had brought back from Ireland one of its petty kings who had been expelled from his tribe by a domestic conspiracy and was keeping him with him with every appearance of friendship, but also with an eye to his future usefulness. I have often heard Agricola say that not only could he have conquered Ireland but held it securely too with just a single legion and a reasonable number of auxiliaries. He also said that it would have been a great advantage to us in our dealings with Britain if the armies of Rome were on every side and the prospect of liberty were, so to speak, whisked from view.

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