WAS IRELAND EVER INVADED BY THE ROMANS?

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The substance of this paper is a discussion which I had in 1881-2 with Dr. Pfitzner of Parchim (the author of "Geschichte der Romischen Kaiserlegionen von Augustus bis Hadrianus") in the columns of the *Manchester Guardian*.

Dr. Pfitzner controverted the generally received opinion that Agricola did *not* invade Ireland by asserting that Tacitus in his "Life of Agricola" (ch. 24) clearly spoke of it. The passage in Tacitus is this:—"In the fifth year of his conquests Agricola crossed in the first ship (*nave primâ transgressus*) and subdued in a series of victories tribes hitherto unknown. In that part of Britain which looks towards Ireland he posted some troops, hoping for fresh conquests rather than fearing attack, inasmuch as Ireland being between Britain and Spain, and conveniently situated for the seas round Gaul, might have been the means of connecting with great mutual benefit the most powerful parts of the Empire. Its extent is small when compared with Britain, but exceeds the islands of our seas. In soil and climate, in the disposition, temper and habits of its population, it differs but little from Britain. We know most of its harbours and approaches, and that through the intercourse of commerce. One of the petty kings of the nation, driven out by internal faction, had been received by Agricola, who detained him under the semblance of friendship until he could make use of him. I have often heard him say that a single legion with a few auxiliaries could conquer and occupy Ireland, and that it would have a salutary effect on Britain for the Roman arms to be seen everywhere, and for freedom, so to speak, to be banished from its sight."

Dr. Pfitzner's contention was, that the sea which Agricola crossed in the first ship was St. George's Channel, and the "unknown tribes" he subdued were Irishmen. All depends upon the identity of the sea which Agricola crossed, and it is therefore necessary to examine his position at the time indicated. At the close of his fourth year's campaign he decided to secure by a chain of forts across Britain the portion of the island which he had subdued, and Tacitus tells us:—"The place for that purpose was where the waters of the Glota (Clyde) and Bodotria (Forth) driven up the country by the influx of two opposite seas are hindered from joining by a narrow neck of land which was then guarded by a chain of forts. On the south side of the isthmus the whole country was bridled by the Romans and evacuated by the enemy, who was driven, as it were into another island."

Agricola's base of operations for his fifth campaign (A.D. 82) was thus evidently the chain of forts between the Clyde and Forth, but, like his successors, he apparently found that the Irish made frequent incursions into Britain, and it was necessary before he advanced further to secure his rear from their attacks which if on one point successful, would probably cause the British tribes in his rear to revolt, and thus cut him off from Southern Britain. Hence his reason for guarding the western coast probably at intervals from Ayrshire to the south of Cumberland.

As Agricola had advanced gradually from Chester by land, on the western side of Britain, for the four previous years, examining personally as Tacitus says, all the firths and estuaries, it is clear that he had no fleet with him, which is further confirmed by his invasion of Anglesea, when his troops swam across the Menai Straits, confounding the Britons, "who expected the arrival of a fleet and a formal invasion by sea." This was in A.D., 78, and we hear nothing of a fleet in Tacitus during 79, 80, or 81. The fleet seems in fact to have been at its usual head-quarters on the south-east coast of England. But an invasion of Ireland would have required a fleet, and it was not until Agricola's sixth campaign in A.D., 83, on the *eastern* side of Scotland that Tacitus mentions the fleet, when he says "Agricola ordered his ships to sail across the gulf

(Bodotria, the Forth), and gain some knowledge of these new regions. The fleet *now acting for the first time in concert with the land forces*, proceeded in sight of the army." He then tells us that at the sight of the Roman fleet the Britons were struck with consternation convinced that every resource was cut off, since the sea, which had always been their shelter, was now open to the invaders.

It follows from this, that the Britons had seen nothing of Agricola's fleet in his fifth campaign, which could hardly have been the case had he embarked a large force on the Clyde or in Wigtonshire for the invasion of Ireland. But there still remains the fact that Agricola (though his fleet did not act with his army) crossed to somewhere in the "first ship." The accepted idea as to this, is, that Agricola crossed the Firth of Clyde in the first Roman ship (probably only a small vessel), that had ever performed such a voyage, the troops probably moving round by land, or crossing in small extemporised vessels into Bute and Argyllshire. He no doubt returned to his base line in the autumn.

Dr. Pfitzner laid stress on the fact that in Tacitus (as before quoted), "Agricola's campaign comes first, and after it comes the garrisoning of the British coasts which followed," but I pointed out that if we took his line of argument, I would also say, "Agricola's campaign comes first, and afterwards the statement, 'We know most of its (Ireland's) harbours and approaches, and that through the intercourse of commerce,' not by invasion mind." Again, would Tacitus have spoken *in this same chapter* of this commercial knowledge of Ireland, have told us of its soil and climate, described its inhabitants and their disposition, and told us that one of their kings was in Agricola's camp before the campaign of A.D. 82 began, if the Irish were the "unknown nations" to be subsequently invaded? But the wild land of Argyllshire, which (except the decline of population) remained much the same all through the Middle Ages and almost to the present time, would well justify the use of the term "unknown tribes" or "nations."

Had Agricola invaded Ireland (even only to be defeated), Tacitus could scarcely have any motive for suppressing an account of the campaign. Had he successfully effected

such an invasion (which would have required an effort second only to the invasion of Britain, even if made from Port Patrick to Larne or Donaghadee), would it not have been the great topic of the day in Rome, have engaged the attention of the Senate, conferred a new title on the Emperor, and been recorded in bronze and marble in many places? And if he had failed in such an attempt, would not Domitian have been the first to have him disgraced and probably executed? But we hear of none of these things. Inscriptions and historians are alike silent. No Roman *temporary* camps even, which would certainly have been formed, if troops had been sent over, are found in Ireland.

The words of Tacitus, that he "had often heard Agricola say that a single legion with a few auxiliaries could conquer and occupy Ireland," is inferentially a direct negative to the idea of invasion. Dr. Pfitzner thinks that the *Legio Secunda Adjutrix*, which was over in Britain for a short time, was demanded by Agricola for the purpose of this invasion, but it was probably back again on the continent before A.D. 82. It evidently came over to Britain at the commencement of Vespasian's reign, or about A.D. 71, to help Petilius Cerealis to crush the Brigantes. (See my "Roman Forces in Britain," *Archæol. Journal*, xli, 248).

Everything tends to show that no military occupation of Ireland by Rome took place. Commercial transactions, though brisk during the first half of the Roman sway in Britain, may materially have been reduced during the latter half of that period, owing to the predatory incursions of the Irish. Nearly everything found in Ireland of the Roman age is of late date, is portable, and is of value, just what a piratical band would seize and make off with. Isolated coins of the Higher Empire have been met with here and there, no doubt accidentally lost by traders, &c. and an inscribed medicine stamp (of the usual class) found in the possession of a policeman in the county of Tipperary, is also of this age. But of the Lower Empire I may mention a hoard of 1500 silver coins ranging from Constantius II, A.D. 337, to Constantine III, A.D. 407, with several silver ingots (two of them inscribed), and a quantity of other bullion found near Coleraine in 1854, and another hoard (also of silver) found on Fairhead near the Giants'

Causeway in 1831. Near the entrance to the caves at New Grange (co. Meath) a gold ring set with a stone, a gold chain, two armillae, and a fibula, all of gold; coins of Valentinian and of Theodosius (of gold), a silver coin of Geta, and two much defaced small brass coins have been found.

It will be noticed that all of these finds have been made in the north-east of Ireland, where that island approaches nearest to England, and whence incursions could be made with the greater impunity, and this makes it all the more singular that no trace of Roman habitation or of hoards of spoil like the above has been found in the Isle of Man. The latter would almost seem to have been neutral ground.