

Introduction

The Romans considered themselves able to interfere in the affairs of other places if they believed that their own empire was threatened. The beliefs of the Romans were that they had a mission to rule the world, and to bring the benefits of their society to others. As the Romans went about invading and Romanising lands their ambition was to persuade opponents to submit peacefully, if not then military action would be taken which often led to Roman victory. The first successful Roman invasion into Britain was by Julius Caesar in 54BC. Following further successful campaigns into Britain, Vespasian was appointed the emperor in 69AD. Agricola was appointed governor of Britannia due to him being a strong supporter of the Flavian dynasty. Agricola's predecessor Cerealis established a fort in Carlisle and his work may have extended to Strathmore in the North, thus Agricola had a platform to work from as he began leading the Roman army in 77AD. Throughout Agricola's time as governor he worked under another two emperor's Titus and Domitian. The Flavians were a brand new dynasty and attempted to establish themselves through military gain.

Whilst accounts from Agricola's son in law Tacitus suggests that Agricola was a great military leader, historians such as Hanson have reason to doubt Agricola's role by suggesting "Tacitus was exaggerating Agricola's qualities"¹ and Wooliscroft also supports this argument by explaining "it is always dangerous to put too much faith into the 'Agricola'". Modern academics such as Wooliscroft and Hoffmann doubt Agricola's role in Northern Britain as there have been sites that pre-date his invasion, this means that the credit Agricola as achieved for expanding Roman boundaries, subduing hostile tribes and gaining glory of being the first to conquer the North are potentially inaccurate. In this dissertation it will be argued that Agricola was a great military leader and led a successful invasion of northern Britain. This argument will examine how Agricola conquered the north, whether he was a successful general and his administrative and fort building skills.

¹ W. Hanson, *Agricola and the Conquest of the North*, London, B.T Batsford Ltd, 1987, p. 16.

Part 1 – Evidence for Agricola being a successful military leader

Agricola's arrival in Britain AD77

Agricola was appointed governor of Britain by Vespasian in AD77. Agricola was thought to be a strong supporter of the Flavian dynasty as suggested by Tacitus, hence Vespasian appointed him governor of Britannia. Agricola served as a military tribune during the Boudican revolt and as the legionary legate, giving him prior knowledge of the land. Agricola's first actions as governor of Britain was the suppression of the Ordovices in AD77 a tribe located in central and north Wales. The tribe took advantage of the Romans sluggishness to launch an attack on cavalry regiments. Tacitus also states that Agricola had encountered serious trouble 'not long before his arrival the community of the Ordovices had almost completely destroyed an ala (military unit) operating in their territory'². Agricola wanted to take action against the Ordovices however it was late in the season and conditions didn't favour military action, however Agricola hunted down the tribe and Tacitus states 'almost the whole tribe was slaughtered'³. Agricola ventured further to Anglesey to quash any rebellions. The Batavians who Tacitus suggests were 'accustomed by tradition to swim with weapons while controlling their horses' were sent across. The end campaign was brought to an end with the surrender of Anglesey. This is important as Agricola and the Romans showed their intentions right at the beginning of their conquest. The decision to "slaughter" the tribe suggests that this was the ruthlessness that Agricola wanted to maintain throughout his campaign.

2nd & 3rd Campaigning Season AD78-79

Moreover, the first full campaigning season was in the territory of the Brigantes in AD78. Agricola first priority in this season was to ensure the Brigantes in Northern England were suitably pacified. Tacitus states during Agricola's second season 'he built forts'. Agricola created an organisation of a logistically sustainable network of forts running back to Chester and York and into Carlisle. Historian Duncan B. Campbell suggests "Agricola was steadily laying down the foundations for an invasion of Caledonia"⁴. The Romans may also have made a treaty with tribes such as the Selgovae and Votadini in the Southern Uplands of Scotland. This is important in showing that Agricola was a successful military leader as his first priority before invading further North was to consolidate what had been conquered and ensuring in the years to follow there was a system in place to prevent the army being overrun. Also, Agricola made

² Tacitus, *the Agricola*, Penguin, 2010, p. 12.

³ Tacitus, *the Agricola*, Penguin, 2010, p. 12.

⁴ D. Campbell, *Mons Graupius AD83*, Osprey Publishing, 2010, p. 41.

sure there was a platform to invade from in the next season which suggests he was planning ahead before progressing north and invading tribes in Northern Britain. Furthermore, the third season (AD79) saw the Roman army progress as far north as the Tay where they encountered a new tribe called the Dumnoii. G. Maxwell states ⁵“there was little resistance, and the army had leisure to engage in fort building”. The land of the Dumnoii stretched from the Forth Clyde isthmus and into Perthshire and Stirlingshire. The Roman army was able to subdue the tribe, and hostages were handed over. Campaigning armies based themselves in marching camps rather than forts which were larger but harder to defend, this may have been used by Agricola on the march to the Tay. Marching camps firstly offered a secure base to continue an advance and secondly offered protection in the event of a surprise attack. During this campaigning season, back in Rome, emperor Vespasian had died and was replaced by his son Titus. Duncan B. Campbell suggests that Agricola’s progress slowed down due to the change of emperor, “he had other ideas for Britain as Agricola’s forward momentum certainly seemed to have stalled”⁶. This shows Agricola was able to lead an army further north and successfully subdue tribes as well as gain land without facing major problems as had been encountered with the Ordovices. It is also noticeable that although progress was slower, Agricola was retained by the new emperor even if as Duncan B. Campbell suggests “the new emperor perhaps had different ideas”⁷. Agricola’s military leadership helped expand the Roman Empire by conquering new land even with a change of emperor.

4th and 5th Campaigning Season AD80-81

Moreover, Agricola in his fourth season (AD80) consolidated the conquered lands as Tacitus states ‘the fourth season was spent securing what had been overrun’⁸. Agricola was smart enough to ensure that all of lowland Scotland was secure and as Duncan B. Campbell states “the Boudican revolt was a reminder for Agricola” and if Titus’ plan was to eventually complete the conquest it was “sensible to move individual army units up within range of Caledonia”⁹. Agricola’s army had secured a huge area of land. There are three forts that suggest occupation during the Flavian period. Barochan, Mollins which are to the South of the Antonine frontier, and Camelon which is to the North. This is important as securing the grounds of lowland Scotland meant that the Romans couldn’t be caught off guard with an attack coming from the south as they ventured north. After serving twice before, Agricola was wise enough to

⁵ G. Maxwell, *The Romans in Scotland*, Birlinn Ltd, 1998, p. 30.

⁶ D. Campbell, *Mons Graupius AD83*, Osprey Publishing, 2010, p. 43.

⁷ D. Campbell, *Mons Graupius AD83*, Osprey Publishing, 2010, p. 43.

⁸ Tacitus, *the Agricola*, Penguin, 2010, p. 15.

⁹ D. Campbell, *Mons Graupius AD83*, Osprey Publishing, 2010, p. 43.

learn from mistakes that were previously made by the Romans in Britain to endure that attacks or uprisings from tribes didn't push the Roman army back. Furthermore, Agricola continued to consolidate during the fifth season (AD81), however the army was distributed across the lands of the Selgovae and Votadini before Agricola realized that he had bypassed Galloway (land of the Novante). In order for the Romans to secure the lands in lowland Scotland an invasion into Galloway was needed. Whilst in the territory of the Novante, Agricola contemplated an invasion of Ireland. However, as Agricola's army returned to their winter quarters the news of Titus' death would have arrived. Domitian became the new emperor, with clear instructions to finish the job as he lacked military glory. This is an important reason for suggesting Agricola was a successful leader of the Roman army as his methods were clear, to consolidate land and subdue potentially troublesome tribes before progressing further north for greater conquests. Agricola's ability to recognise potential dangers that may occur helped the Roman army's invasion of Northern Britain to expand the empire smoother and effective.

6th Campaigning Season AD82

Moreover, the sixth season (AD82) preparations were made for a final push into Caledonia. During Agricola's third season he had penetrated as far as the Tay and probably received hostages from the Dumnoii. It is most likely that the communities of the Dumnonian in Perthshire and Stirlingshire were now "enveloped" by forts for the final advance north. The position of these forts, at the limits of Dumnonian lands, were such that they could draw supplies. The Roman army attacked by land and sea which terrified local tribes and the Caledonia realised there was no safe place, so went to war. The first action taken by the Caledonia was to attack the northernmost forts which led to an evacuation by Agricola's staff. Tacitus explains that Agricola was aware of the superior numbers of the enemy, he was determined not to be outflanked and divided the army into three groups. This shows that the leadership of Agricola was successful as although a risky strategy his tactics and preparations were important to the Romans eventually conquering the Caledonia.

Final Campaigning Season AD83 – Mons Graupius

Moreover, Agricola's final season was in AD83, this was the campaign in which the battle of Mons Graupius took place. The exact location of the battle is unknown, both Aberdeen and on the borders between the Highlands and Lowlands have been suggested as potential sites for the fight between the Romans and Caledonia. The leader of the Caledonia was Calgacus, assembling 30,000 warriors in preparation for a fight against the Roman army. Tacitus

suggests that the enemy 'had great superiority in numbers'¹⁰. It is thought that Agricola had 8,000 auxiliary infantry and around 5,000 auxiliary cavalry along with vacillations from the four legions. Agricola's force totalled roughly 20,000. The battle started with an exchange of missiles before the Romans advanced up the slope. The Roman advance was halted temporarily due to the Caledonians and the ground of the battlefield however Agricola sent in reserve cavalry which fell on the rear of the Caledonian infantry. This is important as Agricola's preparations and tactics helped the Romans win a major battle and this victory would have been the pinnacle of Agricola's leadership.

The building of the Gask Ridge

Agricola is viewed as being a great fort builder and innovative in designing forts. He is credited with establishing the 'Flavian Frontier'. The Gask Ridge was built during the Flavian dynasty and ran north of the forth of Clyde and had no fewer than 11 watchtowers. This was the first frontier in the North and the entire empire. The frontier has a "line" of forts, fortlets and watchtowers along a military road which starts at Glenbank and ends at Bertha. This is important as it shows Agricola made a key contribution to how the Roman army advanced in Northern Britain, establishing a frontier may have showed an acceptance that there was a limit to Roman expansion however this may also suggest that this frontier was used to maintain control before an invasion North. This suggests Agricola may have felt that control and a frontier to establish what was conquered was needed for a successful invasion into Northern Britain. G. Maxwell's opinion is that it ¹¹"may therefore be possible to see the separate stages of Agricola's conquest of Caledonia as culminating in a series of successive linear defence systems". Furthermore, the most northerly forts along the frontier were used to prevent attacks from the highland massif. The building of the Gask Ridge, the first in the Roman empire' was "built to control the strategic, potential invasion corridor through Strathmore, Strathearn and Strathallan"¹² according to D.J Wooliscroft. Forts, fortlets and watchtowers were part of a system designed to control, and maintain control of the frontier. As D.J Breeze suggests the frontier would endure that "rules were kept"¹³ and that "movement was controlled"¹⁴, it would function to "regulate people's movement"¹⁵. This is important as it shows that the frontier was created for strategic purposes and the intentions of the frontier was to maintain the land

¹⁰ Tacitus, *the Agricola*, Penguin, 2010, p. 16.

¹¹ G. Maxwell, *the Romans in Scotland*, Birlinn Ltd, 1998, p. 126.

¹² D. Wooliscroft, and B. Hoffmann, *The Roman Gask Project*, <http://www.theromangaskridgeproject.org/>

¹³ D. Breeze, *Roman Scotland*, London, B.T Batsford, 1996, p. 53.

¹⁴ D. Breeze, *Roman Scotland*, London, B.T Batsford, 1996, p. 53.

¹⁵ D. Breeze, *Roman Scotland*, London, B.T Batsford, 1996, p. 59.

that had been gained. The decision to create the Gask Ridge gave the Romans a perfect platform to work from and successfully continue their invasion. The idea of establishing a frontier system north of the Forth-Clyde line could have been a potential attempt to enclose the salient of good arable land that lay between the Forth and the Tay. As well as this the Roman army may have seen the Gask Ridge as a temporary launching pad for invasion further north. This is important as Agricola was able to recognise lands that would be helpful for the Romans, a place they could grow crops as well as successfully invade from shows that Agricola had good knowledge of the British lands which would have been useful for the army. ¹⁶“Others again would maintain the traditional view that all 1st century forts and permanent installations were produced directly by the operation of Agricola” according to Maxwell

Overall Agricola’s military leadership in Britain was successful. The first action taken by Agricola was the suppression of the Ordovices, his decision to “slaughter” the tribe proved his qualities as a leader to take military action over any problems that would affect the Roman attempts to conquer northern Britain. Agricola is also known as being a great fort builder and this evidence is provided with the creation of the Gask Ridge which was a strategic idea to control the tribes that had been conquered and building forts in the north shows that “Agricola was steadily laying down the foundations for an invasion of Caledonia”¹⁷. The victory achieved at Mons Graupius also ensured that Agricola was a successful governor, the Roman tactics were far superior to the Caledonia and the planning and preparation led to a severely outnumbered Roman army comfortably defeat the Caledonia, a battle which was the pinnacle of Agricola’s career.

¹⁶ G. Maxwell, *The Romans in Scotland*, Birlinn Ltd, 1998, p. 92.

¹⁷ D. Campbell, *Mons Graupius*, Osprey Publishing, 2010, p. 41.

Part 2 – Evidence for Agricola being an unsuccessful military leader

Tacitus' account of Agricola's invasion North

On the other hand, it could be argued that Agricola may not have been the great military leader who successfully navigated the Roman army to victory in Northern Britain. The "Agricola" written by Tacitus is the only narrative source from that time in British history. Tacitus wrote accounts of Agricola's actions throughout the invasion of Northern Britain, but with the suggestion from historians such as Hanson that Tacitus exaggerated Agricola's abilities. T. Clarkson offers the opinion that the 'Agricola'¹⁸ "does not offer straightforward, factual report of administrative policies or military campaigns, nor is it concerned with presenting an objective view of the peoples and places encountered by Agricola". This is important as Tacitus' accounts of Agricola's major successes in Britain such as subduing tribes or building frontiers may not be entirely accurate and his sparing details suggests Agricola was not as crucial to the Roman advance north. Moreover, the "Agricola" was written for entertainment purposes for the people back in Rome. During the battle of Mons Graupius Tacitus suggests that the leader of the Caledonia is Calgacus which translated is 'swordsmen'. It is probable that this name was made up by Tacitus for the purposes of his book. Hanson explains that "Accordingly style and presentation were at least as important as content"¹⁹. There is also the possibility that the speeches he describes before the battle of Mons Graupius were made up. However this is unlikely as firstly the tribe of the Caledonia would have spoken a different language and secondly it is unlikely that Agricola would have made a speech to thousands of troops before battle. This is important as Tacitus' writing suggests there is information that is factual however there is also parts that are inaccurate or may not have happened. Tacitus' wanted to show his father in law to be the best, this may explain why from the perspective of the "Agricola" that his campaigning was extremely successful. Wooliscroft also dismisses the idea that this victory was a remarkable triumph for Rome suggesting it was a "mere skirmish"²⁰ and labels Agricola as an administrator, not a military tactician.²¹ E. Fraser suggests that "Agricola is far vaguer and less committal about the war than the superstructure that scholarship has built around". Furthermore, the location of a major battle for both the Caledonia and the Romans is excluded by Tacitus. A reason for this lack of detail has been suggested by D.J Breeze who explains "Tacitus is extremely sparing with

¹⁸ T. Clarkson, *The Picts*, Tempus Publishing, 2008, p. 11.

¹⁹ W. Hanson, *Agricola and the Conquest of the North*, London, B.T Batsford Ltd, 1987, p. 16.

²⁰ D. Wooliscroft, *Rome's First Frontier*, the History Press, 2006

²¹ E. Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland Scotland to 795*, University of Edinburgh Press, 2009, p. 11.

geographical details, which would have been of little interest to the readers"²². Whilst Wooliscroft believes "it is always dangerous to put too much faith into the 'Agricola'"²³. This is important as historians are unsure whether to believe the events of the invasion from Tacitus' perspective. Tacitus's lack of detail leads to uncertainty over the impact Agricola may have had in northern Britain. Hence, the inaccuracy of the "Agricola" written By Tacitus suggests that Agricola's role in the invasion north may not have been as prominent as once thought. The fact that his is the only narrative source from that period does not help the argument that Agricola was a great military leader and led a successful invasion of Britain. However, Agricola is known to be a great fort builder and the development of the Gask Ridge which he is credited for establishing shows his strategic ability and gave the Roman army a platform for further conquest. Also Agricola's methods of invading tribes, consolidating and then invading further show him to be a great military leader and therefore the military leadership of Agricola was successful in the occupation of northern Britain.

Archaeological evidence pre-dates Agricola's occupation in Britain

However, there is also archaeological evidence that supports the idea that Agricola was a good military leader. Modern academics now question Agricola's role in Northern Britain as sites have been found that pre-date Agricola's invasion. These academics have previously used Agricola in order to explain the Roman period and archaeological evidence that has been founded was made to correspond with accounts of Tacitus'. This is supported by historians McNeill and MacQueen who say there are "major difficulties in relating Tacitus' narrative to the archaeological evidence and in dating the process of abandonment"²⁴. Agricola may be wrongly credited with the expansion of the Roman Empire, subduing troublesome tribes and being the first to conquer the North. This suggests that Agricola wasn't the successful emperor that was thought to have conquered Northern Britain but instead there is the possibility that someone previous to him was responsible for advancing north. Furthermore, there is evidence that suggests that Agricola may not have been the first governor to occupy North Britain. Agricola's predecessor Cerealis established a fort in Carlisle, and these activities may have extended further north into Strathmore. Physical evidence of Cerealis occupying north Britain before Agricola has been found by David Shotter, who has discovered Neronian and Vespasian coins that pre-date Agricola. Also literary evidence from Silius Italicus who wrote a poem suggesting that Britain was conquered before Vespasian's death supports the

²² D. Breeze, *Roman Scotland*, London, B.T Batsford Ltd, 1996 p. 16.

²³ D. Wooliscroft, and B. Hoffmann, *The Roman Gask Project*, <http://www.theromangaskridgeproject.org/>

²⁴ P. McNeil and L. MacQueen, *Atlas of Scottish History*, Edinburgh, The Scottish Medieavates and Department of Geography, University of Edinburgh, 1996, p. 37.

view of an earlier occupation. This is important as this provides multiple different types of evidence of Cerialin origins and activities prior to the beginning of Agricola's invasion of Northern Britain. Therefore Agricola may have been provided with a secure platform to invade from when his conquest of Northern Britain began. Hence, evidence produced by archaeologists and historians provides an explanation to suggest that Agricola's military leadership wasn't as successful or as great as Tacitus writes. Agricola's invasion may have been made somewhat easier by his predecessor Cerialis establishing forts in the north of England. However, Agricola's ability to create a structure to the Romans invasion of Northern Britain enabled action that was taken against tribes to be successful without other issues arising from tribes that had already been subdued and conquered. Through Agricola's military leadership the Romans steadily claimed lands in the North and led a successful invasion of Northern Britain.

Conclusion

Overall the military leadership of Governor Agricola was successful in the occupation of Northern Britain. Agricola strategic planning through the invasion helped the Romans subdue northerly tribes successfully whilst also consolidating the gains the army had already made. He also showed himself to be tactically astute during the battle of Mons Graupius which was a major victory for the Romans, this along with establishing the Gask Ridge meant that his previous experience and knowledge of the land led to him being a victorious governor, which was appreciated back in Rome where he was treated to a 'triumph'. However, the first-hand knowledge we have from Tacitus cast doubt over how great Agricola's success was. The 'Agricola' according to historians lacks details and is not accurate. As D.J Breeze explains "Tacitus is extremely sparing with geographical details"²⁵ this includes at the battle of Mons Graupius, one of Agricola's greatest achievements. The lack of insight may suggests this battle wasn't as great as had been made out and like Wooliscroft suggests it was a "mere skirmish"²⁶. Furthermore, there is archaeological evidence that would suggests that Cerealis had established forts as far as Carlisle, this would suggests that Agricola was not the first to expand, subdue and conquer the north. However, Agricola was a successful military leader as he conquered lands north and established a frontier that allowed the Romans to strategically control land that they had successfully gained. As Duncan B. Campbell suggests "Agricola was steadily laying down the foundations for an invasion of Caledonia". Therefore the military leadership of Agricola in northern Britain was successful.

²⁵ D. Breeze, *Roman Scotland*, London, B.T Batsford Ltd, 1996, p. 16.

²⁶ D. Wooliscroft, and B. Hoffmann, *The Romans Gask Project*, <http://www.theromangaskproject.org/>

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