

The Roman Empire: Invaders

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IN AD 79 the Roman army under Gnaeus I Julius Agricola, governor of Britain, reached the River Tay. Four years later the same army defeated the Caledonian tribes at the battle of Mons Graupius and the conquest of Britain seemed to be assured. But this was not to be. Within a generation the Romans had withdrawn to the Tyne-Solway line, where they were to build Hadrian's Wall in the 120s; and for the next 300 years that Wall was to be the northwest frontier of the Roman empire.

On two occasions, in the 140s and again from 208 to 211, Roman armies conquered southern Scotland, and in the 4th century there were also to be military expeditions against the Picts; but for most of that period the Roman influence in Scotland was restricted to the occupation of outpost forts in the Cheviots and its foothills, to the mounting of scouting patrols, and the formalising of treaties with its Celtic tribal chieftains.

Northern Scotland remained unconquered, southern Scotland frontier country.

The Invasion of Scotland

The Romans invaded Britain in AD 43 not for economic reasons but, according to the Roman writer Suetonius, in order to provide the new emperor, Claudius, with military prestige.

In a military dictatorship such as the Roman Empire the winning of military victories was the best way for an emperor to secure his position on the throne. Claudius duly gained his triumph and promptly lost interest in Britain. It was the accession of a new emperor, Vespasian, in 69 that brought about a change in policy.

Vespasian had served in the army of invasion. He ordered a new initiative in Britain and within the space of less than 15 years his governors conquered northern England, Wales and southern Scotland.

Gnaeus Julius Agricola came to Britain as governor in AD 77. After operations elsewhere he moved north in 79, reaching the River Tay. The tribes of southern Scotland were incorporated into the province, the Forth-Clyde isthmus was garrisoned, and there the Roman advance halted.

Ireland. In 82 he returned to this northern advance, moving against the tribes of Caledonia. It was not until nearly the end of the following season that he was able to force - and win - a set-piece battle at an unknown location called Mons Graupius.

It was an 18th-century misreading of this name which led the Grampian mountains, and later Grampian Region, to be so named.

Agricola had served in Britain for seven campaigns and he retired soon after his victory. He clearly considered that he had decisively defeated the Caledonians, and his son-in-law, the Roman historian Tacitus, was to write, about 15 years later, that Britain was conquered.

Roman success was short-lived. Heavy military defeats on the Danube forced the Romans to withdraw part of their army from Britain in 87 or 88, and as a result most forts beyond the Cheviots were abandoned. By the end of the century those bases in turn were given up and the most northerly Roman forts lay on the Tyne-Solway isthmus. The status quo was recognised by the Emperor Hadrian, who ordered the construction of his Wall on that line.

Hadrian's Wall took many years to build. Work probably started in 122 or 123 and the troops were still modifying the frontier installations at the time of the emperor's death in 138. Within a few months his successor, Antoninus Pius, decided on a new forward policy in Britain and preparations started in 139 with the recommissioning of the fort at Corbridge on one of the two main routes into Scotland.

Information and images in these pages are extracts from the HMSO publication 'Invaders of Scotland' by Anna Ritchie and David J Breeze. This fascinating volume contains many more images and drawings and continues the invaders theme with sections on the Vikings and Angles. Well worth the price. To buy this book try at Amazon.com for ISBN 011494136X