

Where was Mons Graupius?

The most famous battle in ancient Scotland took place on the slopes of *mons Graupius* in about AD 83, according to the Roman writer Tacitus, describing the campaigns of his father-in-law Agricola. No one has yet definitely located that battlefield, but there used to be a website called *RomanScotland*, which carefully analysed all the locations that have been proposed. Unfortunately that website has vanished, but not before it impressed me with the quality of its logic and the likelihood that it had found the correct battlefield.

Essentially *RomanScotland* endorsed a suggestion by Richard [Feachem](#) (1970). He accepted what William Watson (1926:55-56) wrote, who was in turn following William [Skene](#) (1867) in thinking that a battle in AD 965 at *Dorsum Crup* actually happened at Duncrub, Perthshire. Battles are well known to recur at the same site centuries apart, driven by facts of geography that never change, so it is reasonable to suggest that the *mons Graupius* battle was also at Duncrub and that *graupius*, *crup*, and *crub* were fundamentally the same word.

This idea ran into opposition from two directions. Historians have long been convinced that Agricola was well north of the river Tay for the *mons Graupius* battle; see for example [Campbell](#) (2015). And historical linguists dislike suggestions that ancient British proper names were constructed in any language that was not Celtic; see for example [Breeze](#) (2002).

All this caught my attention because of the name *Victorie* in the Ravenna Cosmography and Ουικτωρια in Ptolemy's Geography. Both these sources are more informative about locations in Scotland than is commonly realised and there is no doubt that *Victoria* belongs south of the Tay, possibly near the Roman camp at Dunning, near Duncrub.

I have never visited this area (possibly best known for the expensive Gleneagles Hotel) and my thinking that it contains *mons Graupius* is entirely due to that lost website. It had diagrams of Roman troops marching out of Dunning camp to face Caledonian warriors arrayed up the Ochil Hills, and discussions of the strategy involved, where a lot revolved around the logistics of feeding an army. Let's try to reconstitute the logic.

The Latin text of [Tacitus](#) and an English translation (which contains a few subtle errors) are on the Internet, but Wikipedia's [Mons Graupius](#) entry offers a good summary of the key points, notably some numbers. Tacitus estimated the Caledonian army at 30 000, with 10 000 killed. That might be an exaggeration, but not by much because Tacitus says the Romans were outnumbered, despite having 11 000 auxiliaries, plus two legions and four squadrons of cavalry. He also mentions six cohorts in the thick of the fighting and Roman losses of 360.

These numbers cannot fit the locations north-west of Aberdeen favoured by some authors. The Roman army would, by that point, have left a trail of garrisons further south, and would be struggling to feed itself that far from sea-going ships. However, the real problem is on the Caledonian side. Few societies ever manage to mobilise more than 10% of their population to bear arms and there is no way that 300 thousand people could have lived in Iron-Age Scotland within trekking range of a northern battle site.

Even with a southern site such as Duncrub either Tacitus' numbers are grossly wrong or the Caledonians managed to call up all men and boys from a very large area. One has to imagine messengers galloping around to the main centres of Iron-Age political power near modern Perth, Sterling, Dundee, Edinburgh, and Glasgow, plus thousands of lesser villages and farmsteads. The commitment of so many Caledonian warriors in a politically fragmented society is hard to explain. Bitter experience of Roman greed, warnings from further south, and xenophobia stirred up by populist demagoguery do not seem enough.

This line of thought had little predictive value until I read the [pages](#) in Watson (1926) about the survival of [nemeton](#) ‘sanctuary’ in later Scottish place names. In particular, Tarnavie was described in the 1600s as “an artificial knoll, evidently raised and gathered together by men’s hands, resembling a ship: whether this has been a work of the Picts or the Romans is not well known”. Watson explained that name as compounded from Gaelic *tarr* ‘bulging spur of an eminence’ plus *neimidh*, the Gaelic way of writing *nemeton*.

Amazingly, Tarnavie is in exactly the right place to mark a possible location of *mons Graupius*. The ship-shaped mound is at NN987131 and it can be seen best from above in Bing Maps. Google Street View [shows](#) that mound from the side very clearly, with the hill called Craig Rossie looming up behind, a perfect fit to Tacitus’ account of the battlefield. For once, no hedge blocks the view and a farm track leads temptingly to the mound.

Craig Rossie hill is a perfect fit to Tacitus’ account of some Caledonians hanging back from the messy slaughter below, because it rises steeply up to multiple peaks crowned with forts. *Graupius* also fits the English word crop, whose original meaning was ‘head or top of a plant’. Crop (and outcrop) can be traced back to a proto-Germanic [root](#), meaning something like ‘cluster’, which would definitely have existed in Agricola’s day, and which shows up in later place names (Smith, 1956:113-4). A word like that must have been used in the Roman army, because Tacitus explicitly states that the bulk of the fighting was done by Batavian and Tungrian auxiliaries, who grew up in areas we now call Holland and Flanders.

Linguists’ dislike of this explanation for Duncrub and *Graupius* rests on the fact that the local peasantry spoke Gaelic in mediaeval times and probably Pictish before that. Almost nothing is known for certain about Pictish speech, but that does not matter because there may not have been much of it around after the battle. According to Tacitus “the silence of desolation reigned everywhere: the hills were forsaken, houses were smoking in the distance, and no one was seen by the scouts.” Any Caledonians left alive would need to dance to a Roman tune. One can easily imagine Batavian and Tungrian wounded being billeted on local widows, with the best farmland near the battle site confiscated by Rome.

Any proper names mentioned by Tacitus (such as [Calgacus](#)) reveal little about the local peasantry because they have been filtered through Latin and Tacitus’s imagination. So what about place names in the *Cosmography*? Around here it lists ...[Uguste](#) [Leviodanum](#) [Poreoclassis](#) [Levioxava](#) [Cermium](#) [Victorie](#) [Marcotaxon](#) [Tagea](#) [Voran](#), where for each of these names one can ask what it might have meant if it was coined in the languages of the Roman commanders, or Roman soldiers, or indigenous locals.

Throughout Roman Britain, proper names can often be explained best in ancient Greek. To some extent this may be a historical accident. Massive dictionaries exist for ancient Greek, whereas many other ancient languages vanished almost without trace. And of course geographers such as Ptolemy wrote in Greek. However, this area shows some amazingly strong Greek traces, as anyone can see by following the hyperlinks to individual names.

Furthermore tribal names around here – [Δαμνονιοι](#), [Ουενικονες](#), and [Boresti](#) – look like Greek-tinged outsiders’ descriptions. Ptolemy’s [Ὀρρεα](#) πολις of the [Ουενικωνες](#) was probably a native hill-fort or *Coria*, not the same as the Roman naval base [Poreoclassis](#) (another Greek-tinged name). And even the name *Graupius* itself might derive from [γρυπη](#) ‘vulture’s nests’. Obviously this argument must not be pushed too far (not least because it will upset Celtic nationalists) but still one has to think.

Greek speakers may have been prominent among the non-combatant staff (medics, engineers, pen pushers, personal valets, etc) who inevitably accompanied any Roman commander. Roman aristocrats like Caesar were taught Greek as a second language, and Greek was the

prestige language before Latin in Gaul, notably on the Riviera where Agricola grew up. An [inscription](#) found at York suggests that Σκριβ Δημήτριος was on the governor's staff, and was possibly the same as *Demetrius* of Tarsus who told Plutarch about sailing off Scotland.

Perhaps after the big battle Agricola's troops overwintered in Fife, where marching camps are known at [Auchtermuchty](#), [Edenwood](#), and [Bonnytown](#). It is reasonable to guess that the whole peninsula of Fife, south-east of a line from Stirling to Perth, was ruled by Roman allies, because its productive arable land is remarkably devoid of Roman traces. Hints of an early [Frisian](#) presence north of the Firth of Forth make one wonder about the retirement places of Roman soldiers recruited around the mouth of the Rhine and posted to Scotland at any time after AD 83.

Now back to that word *nemeton*. Watson wrote that in Gaul "probably every tribe had one or more such places of judgment and of worship" but he did not stress that all humans seem keen to travel long distances to gather at ceremonial centres, from Stonehenge to the Hill of Tara, from Mecca to the World Cup. Many cultures did it, with a wide range of words for the assembly place (moot, *ting*, *rath*, *cruc*, *gorsedd*, *circus*, etc), but they all needed to agree on where and when to meet, and then to build a long-lasting social custom around that assembly.

The name Tarnavie proves that the mound was the marker for such an assembly in Gaelic-speaking times. There is no need to suppose that the mound was entirely built by human effort (like a Scottish Silbury hill), because it looks like a natural pile of glacial debris, known as a [protalus rampart](#) (as John Pegg kindly pointed out). So it cannot be directly compared with Viking ship burials, Anglo-Saxon [barrows](#), or the mounds at [Marathon](#) or [Waterloo](#).

Did a tradition of trekking to that mound already exist in Roman times, and if so among how many people? Caledonian warriors (who might have been travelling for days) would have needed a rallying point more tightly defined than the whole Craig Rossie clump of hills. On the Roman side soldiers would have slept reasonably well in their camps at Dunning and Broomhill before facing a tactical advance into battle of a few miles, which modern soldiers regard as nothing special.

Ancient battlefields are notorious for showing few archaeological traces, but not hopeless, as Teutoberg/[Kalkriese](#) shows. Place-name evidence rarely rises above speculative association, such as [Iaciodulma](#)'s proximity to Boudicca's last battle. So it is probably unreasonable to suggest that Tarnavie mound was capped by a memorial to the *mons Graupius* battle, but there could be worse places to go hiking with a metal detector.

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