

Where was Mons Graupius?

a discussion document by Anthony Durham, 11 July 2018

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 sites 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 essentially 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, a πολις of the Δαμνονιοι, 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 the idea that it contains *mons Graupius* is entirely due to that lost *RomanScotland* 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 everything 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.

It is impossible to fit these numbers into the location 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 stay properly fed 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 Brexit-style 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*.

To my amazement, 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. It is also a perfect fit to 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). It 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. In fact, 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 on the other side of the North Sea and posted to Scotland at any time after AD 83.

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 ... [Poreoclassis](#) [Levioxava](#) [Cermium](#) [Victorie](#) [Marcotaxon](#) [Tagea](#) [Vorán](#), where it looks as if the *Cosmographer* started from *Horrea Classis* ‘naval storehouse’ on the Tay at Carpow, and carried on reading names off maps generally heading southwards.

For each of these names one can ask what it might have meant if it was coined in the language of the Roman commanders (Latin, plus a touch of Greek), or Roman soldiers (Germanic, plus heaven knows what), or indigenous locals (Celtic, presumably). Thus, for example, the first element of *Marcotaxon* might mean ‘hammer’, ‘border’, or ‘horse’. At present, guesses about name-to-place assignments in this area posted on this website are untidy. My own thinking is incomplete, and suggestions would be welcome.

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 and used many 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.

Tarnavie mound must have been the marker for such an assembly in Gaelic-speaking times. Did the mound already exist and have that function in Roman times? When the call went out to unite and fight the Romans, was the whole Craig Rossie hill precise enough as a meeting point? Did a tradition of trekking there already exist, and if so among how many people?

Might Tarnavie mound be a memorial to the *mons Graupius* battle, raised over some victims' bodies? (Or else to the later battle of *Dorsum Crup*?) Compare Anglo-Saxon [mounds](#) (e.g. Sutton Hoo) and Viking ship burials, plus earlier precursors (e.g. [Marathon](#)), and parallels all over Eurasia and America. The suggestive ancient place name [Iaciodulma](#) is looking for such a mound to claim somewhere near Boudicca's last battle site. That line of thinking can of course collapse in an instant if someone has already done proper archaeology at Tarnavie. If only I lived a bit nearer!