Society of Antiquaries of Scotland

Roman Camps in Scotland

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CHAPTER 3

Antiquarian tradition

Scotland is fortunate to have an extremely strong antiquarian tradition, particularly when it comes to the remains of the Roman occupations. An early reference was by the venerable Bede, who remarked on the Roman Wall (the Antonine Wall – *Historia Ecclesiastica* I.XII). The two camps at **Burnswark** were visited by a number of antiquaries, hardly surprising as the earthworks are still very prominent today, with the hill dominating the landscape of the surrounding area in Annandale. One of the earliest known sketches of the hill, and the south camp in particular, was by Alexander Gordon (illus 11); his sketch, although extremely stylised, conveys an idea of the south camp (1726: 16–17), and he also sketched the fort and camp at **Dalginross** (Gordon 1726: Pl. 5). Gordon also referred to a note by Commissary Maul (probably in about 1606–12) on the camp at **Kirkbuddo** in Angus (Crawford 1949: 97n). Another visitor to **Burnswark** was Sir John Clerk of Penicuik in 1731 (his sketch is reproduced in Prevost 1961). Sir Robert Sibbald noted various sites during his *Historical Inquiries*, including 'several larger squares' (1707: 37) near **Ardoch** (presumably the camps on the plain to the north of the fort), and a great fort at **Langton** on the Antonine Wall, recorded by Timothy Pont and also conveyed to Stukeley (1720: 5). No evidence for this particular fort has ever emerged and it is more likely to have been a camp, the word 'great' probably being applied to its size in area rather than to any indication that it was a more permanent structure.

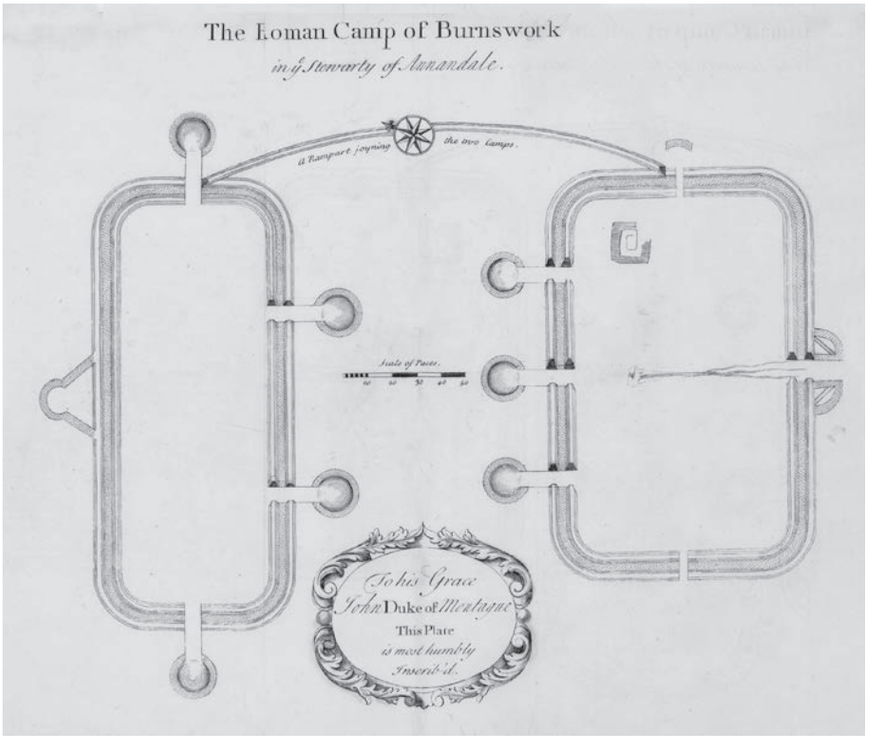

Illustration 11
Plan of the Roman Earthworks at Burnswark Hill from Alexander Gordon's 'Itinerarium septentrionale', published in 1726. (Also see the plan of the camps in illus 92.) © Courtesy of RCAHMS. DP070817. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk.

No doubt the greatest contribution to Roman camp studies by an antiquarian was the survey of *The Military Antiquities of the Romans in Britain* by General William Roy, surveyed in the mid 18th century and published, posthumously, in 1793 (Kings Manuscript in the British Library completed in July 1773). The early detectors of camps were generally men of military backgrounds, interested in the campaigns of earlier armies, particularly those with an accompanying literary

Illustration 12
Plan of Ardoch fort and camps, made by William Roy in 1755 (Plate X from 'Military Antiquities of the Romans in Britain'). © Courtesy of RCAHMS (Society of Antiquaries of London). SC1164070. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk.

tradition, however partial this may be. Edward I is said to have carried a copy of Vegetius' *Epitoma Rei Militaris*, a present from his wife, during his conquest of Wales. (This might highlight a potential problem in identifying the archaeological remains of the Roman period in Wales, although there is no evidence to suppose that Edward followed Vegetius' instructions for the defences of troops on the march.) Comparisons have been made between the movements of the Roman army in Scotland and those of later armies, such as Edward I and Cromwell, the geography of the country dictating similar patterns of movement for land-based armies (Maxwell 1986, Southern 1996).

Roy was born and brought up in Lanarkshire (Macdonald 1917: 163; O'Donoghue 1977: 3) and his professional background was in the military; he assisted in the Survey of Scotland commissioned by the Duke of Cumberland after the battle of Culloden, between 1747 and 1755, although he did not actually join the army until 1755. His interest in Roman antiquities was fired by Captain (later General) Robert Melville, whom he met in the 1750s when Melville was keen to reconstruct the geography of Tacitus' *Agricola* (O'Donoghue 1977: 19). Melville, convinced that the battle between Agricola and Calgacus must have happened towards the eastern extremity of the Grampian mountains, travelled through Strathmore in 1754 and discovered no fewer than four camps (**Lintrose**, **Battledykes**, **Keithock** and **Kirkbuddo**), also sketching **Dalginross** and visiting the Antonine Wall in that year (Balfour-Melville 1917: 123n; Jones & Maxwell 2008). Melville regarded Roy as his 'first proselyte', explaining to him the difference between temporary camps and more permanent stations. The map of Scotland for Cumberland showed only permanent and therefore more prominent fortifications, and Roy spent time in 1755 making plans of Melville's newly discovered camps alongside recording in detail the remains at **Ardoch**, including two of the camps in his plan (illus 12). Melville was obviously also in communication with Maitland, who published a note on the Strathmore camps in 1757 (200), and later Melville contributed some information on his discoveries to Gough's edition of Camden's *Britannia* (1790: iii, 414ff; Macdonald 1917: 170), although he had been losing his sight for some time and was blind by 1789 (Balfour-Melville 1917: 125n).

Roy certainly produced by far the best plans of camps for over a century, and many of his measurements can be verified today. The camp at **Dalginross**, for example, was visible as an earthwork in the 18th century but is now only visible from the air as a cropmark. Roy's plan, made in 1755, when compared to a computer-generated transcription of oblique aerial photographs, is extremely accurate, to the extent that three tumuli recorded on the edge of the plan are also in the correct location (illus 13). (This is despite the fact that the map was intended as a plan of the Roman remains, exemplifying his attention to map-making detail.) Some later antiquarians have been almost critical of his involvement in the survey of Scotland (such as Chalmers 1807: ii, 63), but he is now quite rightly acknowledged as one of the founders of the Ordnance Survey. Roy attempted to garner favour for a national survey of Britain in 1763 (which commenced in 1791, a year after he died (O'Donoghue 1977: 41–2)), because he regarded the map of Scotland prepared for Cumberland as 'a magnificent military sketch, […] rather than a very accurate map' (Roy 1785: 385). His approach to surveying methods was pioneering at the time, and the quality of his technical ability is apparent in three papers published in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* relating to triangulation (1785, 1787 & 1790). He was awarded the Royal Society's *Copley Medal for Science* in 1784, following the measurement of a base on Hounslow-heath (O'Donoghue 1977: 41). However, despite publishing a map of Roman Scotland in 1773 (O'Donoghue 1977: 28; Roy 1793: Pl. I), Roy's *magnum opus* on Roman antiquities was delayed, and it was not published until three years after his death. The most important contribution of this landmark publication is, unsurprisingly, the map detail (he was meticulous in distinguishing between plans made by accurate measurements and sketches made by pacing), but his text was constrained by an over-reliance on Tacitus and a desire to attribute most camps to the campaigns of Agricola.

Many of the early antiquarians were also following the literature of Tacitus, in particular his biography of Agricola. The problems in using this literature to pursue the archaeology have been discussed elsewhere (Hanson 1991), but it led many antiquarians to interpret most Roman camps and, indeed, other remains, as those of Agricola and his troops in the 1st century AD. Great emphasis was placed on the location of the battle against the Caledonians at Mons Graupius, still not located today even with far more sophisticated detection techniques than those available to our illustrious forebears. The antiquarian essays searching for that battlefield are discussed in detail elsewhere (eg Maxwell 1990: 72–90). Numerous antiquaries located the possible place of the battle by applying etymological evidence, looking at place names, or studying archaeological remains. A variety of earthworks, some of which are now known to be non-Roman, were identified

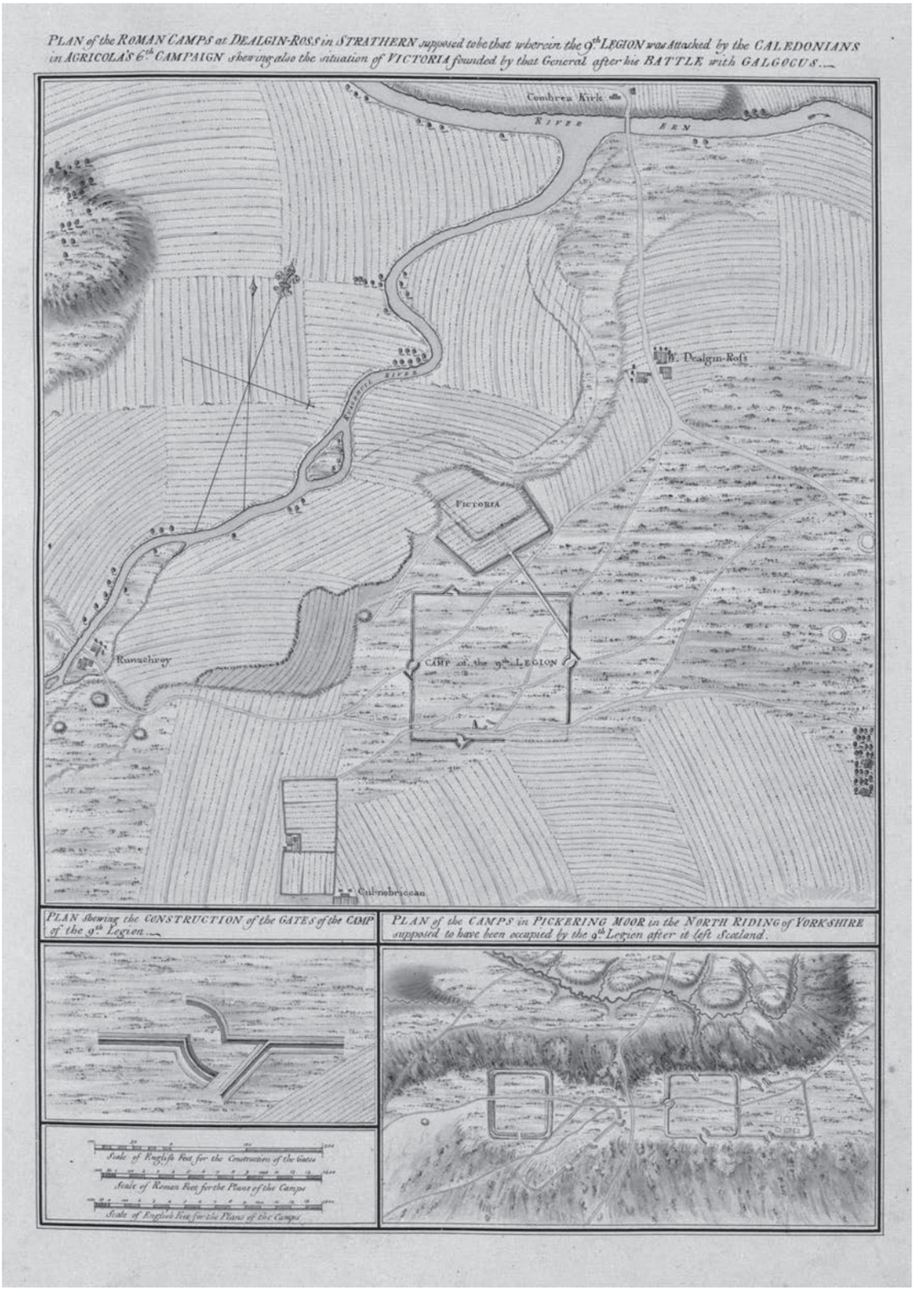

Illustration 13
Plan of Dalginross fort and camp, made by William Roy in 1755 (Plate XI from 'Military Antiquities of the Romans in Britain'). © Courtesy of RCAHMS (Society of Antiquaries of London). SC1164071. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk.

as the likely source of battle, including the Buzzart Dykes, a medieval earthwork north-west of Blairgowrie (said to be the camp of the Caledonian leader, Calgacus (Maxwell 1990: 76; Crawford 1949: 76–7)), and Fortingall in Glen Lyon, a medieval moated site identified with the battle by Horsley (1732: 44; Crawford 1949: 78; Maxwell 1990: 77–8). **Ardoch**, where the remains of the Roman fort had been identified as early as 1672 (Christison 1898: 400–1), was another such potential site of the battle, particularly the camps to the north, identified by such antiquaries as Stuart (1852: 70). However, Stuart wisely commented that it was unlikely that all the military works at Ardoch had been constructed by Agricola, seeing the large camps to the north as too big for Agricola's army and therefore later in date (1852: 189, 252).

Gordon had earlier dismissed Ardoch as the venue, seeing it as no more than a '*castella*', but noting 'the vestiges of a vast large ditch upon the moor, with two or three projections of earth at regular distances [. . .] traced for above two miles' (1726: 39), presumably partially the remnants of the camps lying to the north of the fort. He preferred **Dalginross** as the battle site owing to calculations of the number of men it could accommodate based on Polybius, and the fact that the horses could be housed 'in the other square' (Gordon 1726: 39–40). Roy chose to see **Dalginross** as the location for the attack on the 9th legion, and the reasons for discounting this site as the location of the Mons Graupius battle have been discussed by Maxwell (1990a: 79–81). Applying his own military mind to Tacitus, Roy preferred to see the battle site farther to the north, concluding that it lay north-east of the Tay, possibly in Angus or Kincardine (1793: 84–8). **Raedykes**, for a while the most northerly camp known, was also a favourite site for the battle owing to its position at the apparent extremity of empire and the fact that it was also the largest camp known at the time (Maitland 1757: 202; first sketched by George Brown and Barclay of Urie in 1778). Later, Colonel Shand discovered the more northerly camps at Glenmailen (**Ythan Wells I**) in 1785 (Roy 1793: Pl. LI), followed by **Normandykes** in 1801 (Stuart 1852: 250).

The fascination with the site of the battle of Mons Graupius has not lost its appeal to later generations (for example, Burn 1953; Henderson-Stewart 1960; Feachem 1970; St Joseph 1978a; Keppie 1981; Maxwell 1990; Fraser 2005), although the possibility that the battle was a figment of Tacitus' imagination has also been raised (Henig 1998). But given the close chronological proximity between Agricola's activities and Tacitus' biography, it is unlikely that he would have invented an entire battle. The battle site may one day be identified, for persistent research eventually identified the location of the defeat of Publius Quinctilius Varus and three legions in the Teutoburg Forest in AD 9 (Schlüter 1999; Wilbers-Rost 2002; Wells 2003), suggesting that archaeological evidence may yet furnish clues to the battle site of Mons Graupius.

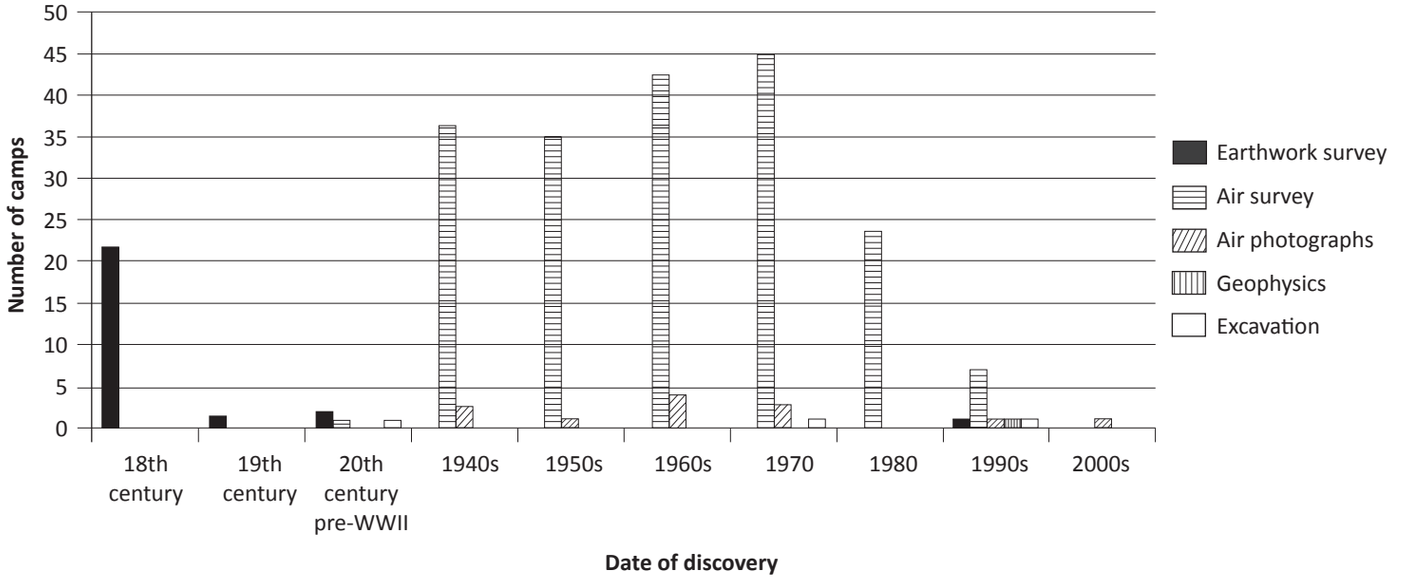

Table 2
Date and method of discovery of camps in Scotland.

The other professionals who identified camps were either men of landed backgrounds, for whom identifying Roman remains was more of a wealthy man's hobby, or men of the clergy. Most ministers were familiar with the writings of Josephus on the Jewish War, and therefore had some knowledge of the campaigns of the Roman army. This may explain the identification of the camps on Llandrindod Common, south of the fort of Castell Collen in Radnorshire, Wales, by the Reverend Thomas Price in 1811 ('a young but intelligent and zealous antiquary' (*Archaeologia* 1814: 168)) and published a short while later. Men of wealthy backgrounds included those who compiled journals and letters recording their visits, one being Douglas in 1782, who described the camp at **Raedykes** on his 'second jaunt to the country' (260–2).

Over thirty camps were recorded by various antiquarians in Scotland before the turn of the 20th century, some during the first Ordnance Survey of Scotland, such as that at **Kintore** by Captain Courtney (1870). Others were still recorded by ground survey thereafter, such as **Little Clyde** by Crawford (Collingwood & Taylor 1924: 207), but the greatest advance in camp studies in the last century was through the use and application of aerial photography (table 2). Many camps recorded as earthworks by antiquarians have since been ploughed away (such as **Dalginross**, compare illus 13 & 53), and the greatest threat to this class of monument has been the revolution in agricultural techniques in recent centuries, some antiquarians recording that earthworks were disappearing through land improvements and ploughing in their lifetimes. A camp was recorded at Arduthy, south of **Raedykes**, in the 18th century, the investigator noting that the camp had been much more distinct in the past, but was partially destroyed by agricultural activities (Barclay 1792: 566). This camp has not yet been rediscovered, although aerial photography has successfully relocated and enabled plans to be drawn or redrawn of a number of sites, such as **Invergowrie**, identified from the air in 1990 (Frere 1991: 226), but first recorded as a camp (Catermillie) by Maitland over two centuries earlier (1757: i, 215).