

Badenoch 69 – 410 AD

When the Romans visited what became the
clan lands of the Macphersons

Reynold Macpherson, 19 January 2011



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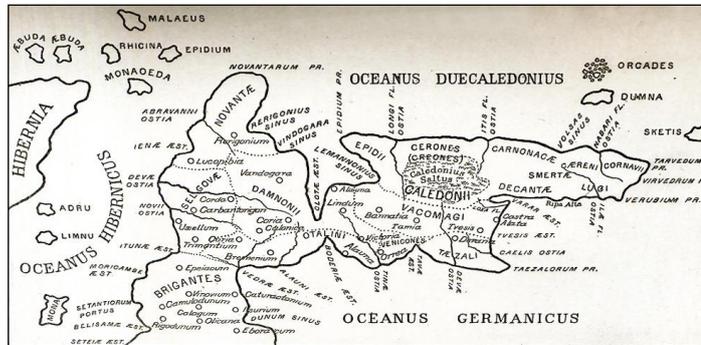
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Introduction

Clan Macpherson was originally part of Clan Chattan, the Clan of the Cat. One of the persistent theories about the origin of the name of Clan Chattan is that it is derived from the Catti, a tribe of Gaul (France today) driven out by the advancing Romans. This now appears unlikely because Clan Chattan's lands are known to have been occupied by the Vacomagi before the Romans first probed into Caledonia (their name for Scotland) in 69 AD and after their departure in 410 AD.

The famous Roman geographer Ptolemy (Claudius Ptolemaeus, c. 90-168 AD), who was of Greek or Egyptian descent and lived in the Roman province of Egypt, recorded the Vacomagi in c.150 AD. He compiled a map of tribes from information gathered from army officers (see above).

Ptolemy's map has been rotated and fitted onto a modern map using a computer (see right). The details have been checked against the description of the locations of the Vacomagi and their neighbors. It appears that the Vacomagi lived in the Strathspey and on the Moray (pronounced Murray) coastal plain. Two of their main towns were named as Pinnata Castra ('a camp with sheltered ramparts' on the coast between Nairn and Lossiemouth today) and Tuesis (somewhere inland on the Spey) (Moffat, 2005, pp. 268-9). The Vacomagi held the land that later became the clan lands of the Macphersons.



The Romans forced the Picts to Collaborate

The Romans came to 'Britannia' to conquer land in search of military glory, valuable minerals and slaves. They grouped the numerous fierce tribes they encountered under three different labels, despite their common cultural origins; 'Britons' in England, 'Scotti' in Ireland, and 'Picts' in Scotland. The term Picts means a 'painted' or tattooed people. Once the Picts were forced to collaborate by a series of Roman military interventions into Caledonia, they grew in military strength. And then, as Rome's power waned, the Picts gradually became dominant. They controlled Caledonia for many centuries after the Romans had left. An excellent timeline of Roman events is available online (Roman Scotland, 2009a).

The first probe into Caledonia probably occurred in 69-71 AD when the Governor of Britannia, Vettius Bolanus, got involved in a Brigantian domestic power struggle between the client Queen Cartimunda and her husband, Venutius. He pushed briefly into 'Caledonian fields of battle.' The second probe was in 71-73 AD when his successor, Petillius Cerialis, crushed Venutius' Brigantians and some their allied 'new peoples' in lowland Caledonia.

The next governor, Gnaeus Julius Agricola, probed across the border in 78 AD before invading in 79 AD. He destroyed the tribal groups he encountered until he reached the territory of prior allies, the Venicones, a people

¹ References are used sparingly with extensive use made of Wikipedia.

said to be part of the ‘Caledonian confederacy’ of the Picts. He consolidated his control of Selgovae and Novantae lands, built defensive posts across the Forth-Clyde isthmus and established a supportive road network in 80-81 AD. In 82 AD, while probing up the Strathmore in Taexali territory, the northern Picts bypassed his forces and destroyed a number of fortified posts to his rear.

Agricola turned back and split his forces into three battlegroups to block the probable retreat routes of the Picts. In a surprise night attack, however, the Picts nearly destroyed the weakest battlegroup based on the 9th Legion. It was a terrible setback for the Romans and one that had to be avenged to restore the Governor’s standing (see his statue right, in Bath, England).

In 83 AD Agricola mobilized all of his available Britannia land and naval forces and advanced once again into Caledonia. The Picts decided to unite and meet him at the Battle of Mons Graupius. Why their change in strategy?

Tacitus provided a detailed explanation. When he published a eulogy of his father-in-law Agricola (40 - 93 AD) he included a detailed account of the strategy that led to the battle. He explained that ‘the Caledonians’ had been engaging in guerilla tactics for many years, refusing to accept Roman rule or face Agricola in open battle. Agricola was under pressure from his young Emperor Domitian for his losses of citizen soldiers and yet instructed not to let the war “drag on ... sowing the seeds of future rebellion” as well as grieving the loss of his year old son in the early summer of 83 AD.

Hence, soon after harvest time in 34 or 35 AD, Agricola sent his fleet and his fast moving light infantry reinforced with auxiliaries (‘helpers’ or mercenaries, not the legions of citizen soldiers) to threaten the tribes’ granaries. The Caledonian clans either had to combine against the Romans or face starvation the following winter.



The Battle of Mons Graupius

The strategy worked and clansmen streamed in from all parts of Caledonia to fight, no doubt including the Vacomagi from Badenoch. They lived less that a week’s march away from the battle site, which is yet to be confirmed by archeological evidence.

Dunning in the Cleavage Hills has been shown to be the leading candidate (Roman Scotland, 2009b). Linguists noted that a river beside a large marching camp at Dunning was named Duncrub which translates into the latin Mons Graupius (‘fort beside the Croup’, the Northern Ochil hills). A team of historians then took all empirical aspects of Tacitus’ description and converted them into criteria for evaluating battle site claims. Dunning met all criteria. Until this finding is refuted using other evidence, it has to be accepted as the most likely site. Locals interviewed explain that while a Roman coin has been found at the marching camp site (e.g. Boxall, 2010), there has been no systematic search of the camp or battle site using metal detectors (Sinclair, 2010).

I have walked the likely battlefield (see right). About 30,000 Caledonians were clustered on the high ground to the right. About 11,000 Roman-trained auxiliaries advanced from left to right up the gentle slope, meeting the Caledonians where the fields end along the base of the hill. The excellent analysis provided by Roman Scotland (2009) explained how the Caledonians were organized:



the bravest – probably the tribal elite and their retainers formed the front battleline while it is likely that it was the tribal levies and Caledonii septs that crowded in distinct clumps up the slope of the hill behind in what Tacitus clumsily tries to describe using the phrase; “in close packed tiers”. The tribal front rank would have been composed of men used to fighting in the Celtic heroic style as individuals. They would therefore be in relative open order and poorly positioned to deal with the tightly packed close order Roman fighting tactic.

Agricola kept his legions of citizen soldiers in reserve (see right). They watched from in front of the ramparts of the camp they had constructed in front of Mons Graupius. Perhaps Agricola wanted to be sure that the Caledonians would finally commit to battle. He offered them odds of more than two to one against his second best troops; four auxiliary cohorts of Batavian infantry and two of Tungrian swordsmen, both probably reinforced by Britons.



The battle started when the 3,000 Roman cavalry swept the Caledonian chariots aside. They been charging back and forth on the flat ground leading up to the Caledonian’s front line without much effect. The Roman cavalry also prevented the wings of the Caledonian army of 30,000 from enveloping the 11,000 Roman-trained auxiliaries. This tactic channeled the wild Caledonians on to the auxiliaries’ shield wall and exposed them to the steel *gladius* used by the Batavians, a razor sharp short gutting sword, and the curved gutting sword of the Tungrians.

The Caledonian tribesmen fought with long swords without points, more suitable to free form man-to-man fighting. Their small round shields gave little protection to their lower abdomen and legs. Their front ranks facing the Roman auxiliaries on the flat ground were also badly cramped by those in the rear pushing forward downhill. The Caledonian front ranks suffered terribly.

The Roman auxiliaries gradually pushed up the hill, stabbing as they went, killing many thousands, until they were almost exhausted. But, as they advanced, the Caledonian Army started to wrap itself around the Roman auxiliaries. At this decisive moment (see right), Agricola ordered his hidden reserve cavalry to make a right hook and attack the Caledonians from the rear, where the less experienced tribesmen were.



Panic set in. It became a rout. Agricola ordered a no-prisoners pursuit until dark. Tacitus claimed that 10,000 Caledonians were killed at cost of 360 auxiliary troops. While these numbers are probably exaggerated, they indicated the scale of the massacre. Another 20,000 reportedly escaped and evaded the Roman scouts the next morning. But worse, as Moffat (2005, p. 265) pointed out,

The aftermath of Mon Graupius was undoubtedly very bloody. Agricola continued his march through the Moray Firth lowlands. The army ate its way across the rich farmland, removing much that would have been needed to survive the winter soon to follow. Many farming families died of starvation in the wake of the invasion. Evidence of the genocide has been found in the archeological record. Pollen cores show a general breakdown of farming in Aberdeenshire in the period and that it took centuries for it to recover.

The surviving Varomagi retreated over or around the Grampians to the Strathspey and took shelter in familiar glens and forests. The Roman army scouts would have penetrated into Badenoch but then turned away north (see right). The Roman army continued its genocidal sweep up the coast to the extreme north of Caledonia. Agricola was then suddenly recalled to Rome and retirement, after an unusually long period as governor (Wikipedia, 2009).

The Varomagi then disappeared from recorded history, and their lands were apparently were not disturbed until their descendents reluctantly took in and integrated with the Gaels emigrating from Ireland in the 700s. In the interim they looked for plunder in the south, especially iron tools and weapons.

Between 84 and 100 AD, the Roman army in Britannia was thinned out to deal with problems elsewhere in the Empire. The Caledonian tribes gradually got bolder at probing Roman defences and plundering their settlements. Tacitus took the view that Caledonia had been “conquered then immediately thrown away”. Sometime between 117 and 119 AD the 9th Legion was probably lost in southern Scotland; the typical fate of legions that suddenly disappeared from Roman army records without explanation. The Romans then introduced a new strategy.

The incoming Governor Hadrian constructed a 73.5 mile/ 117 km wall with turrets (see right) and garrison towns between 120 and 138 AD. Hadrian’s Wall crossed moors and rivers, a major engineering feat. His declared purpose was to control and tax trade but it also acknowledged that the Caledonian tribes could not be subjugated.

The next Governor, Antonine, pushed further north and built his double (stone and turf) 39 mile/ 63 km wall (see below) between 140 and 148 AD, for the same reasons. He erected his wall along the cultural boundary between lowland and highland Caledonia, apparently seeking to divide and rule the tribes. He evidently failed.

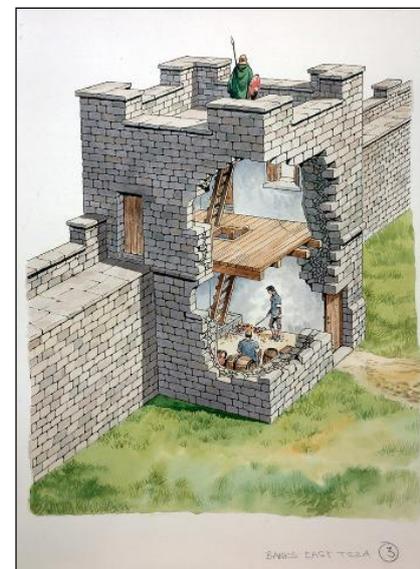
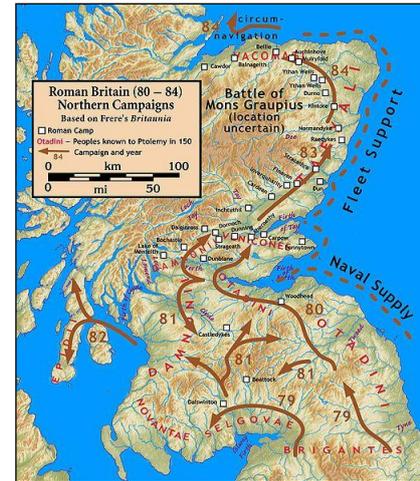
The Antonine wall was soon bypassed by raiding parties from the Highlands. It had to be abandoned after only twenty years use. The garrisons fell back to Hadrian's Wall. And by about 185 AD, all Roman positions in Scotland that could not be resupplied by sea were given up as untenable.

Politics and civil war over succession in the Roman Empire then distracted the garrisons and allowed the Caledonians and a new force in south west to gain greater independence; the Maetae. Hadrian’s Wall was reinforced at various times and continued to mark the limit of the Roman Empire.

In 208 AD the new Emperor Septimius Severus ordered reoccupation and repairs to the Antonine Wall, but within a few years it was abandoned, never to be garrisoned again. One reason was the casualty rate. The Roman historian Herodian recorded that Severus’ army suffered 50,000 casualties, despite its discipline and organization. Although this number is also probably exaggerated, it suggests that the Caledonian guerrilla strategy was very effective.

Another unintended outcome of the Severan campaign was that it created a new military alliance in the Highlands. By 211 AD, Roman records indicate that the northern tribes above the Forth had blended into a new and dynamic force that they referred to using an earlier name; ‘the Picts’.

These Highland Picts were remorseless; they



raided south of Hadrian's Wall four times between 342 and 367 AD and provoked counter attacks in 369 and 384. But in 410 AD the Roman garrisons had to be withdrawn from Britannia, primarily to defend Rome against the invading Goths.

Summary

The final withdrawal of the Roman Army from the Antonine Wall and then from Caledonia to Hadrian's Wall was held to be a major triumph by the Highland Picts and further embedded military prowess as a dominant value in their culture. It reinforced the cult of independent militarism in local kinship social structures. Regional alliances were soon converted into 'kingdoms'.

Of great interest to Clan Chattan and Clan Macpherson members is that Moray and its hinterland, including Badenoch, then became the centre of a leading Pictish kingdom, the Kingdom of Fortriu. The clansmen would have been united in the view that their ancestors saw off the Roman Empire, probably without knowledge of the dire threat that the Goths posed to Rome at the time, which justified both clans and kingdoms.

Conclusion

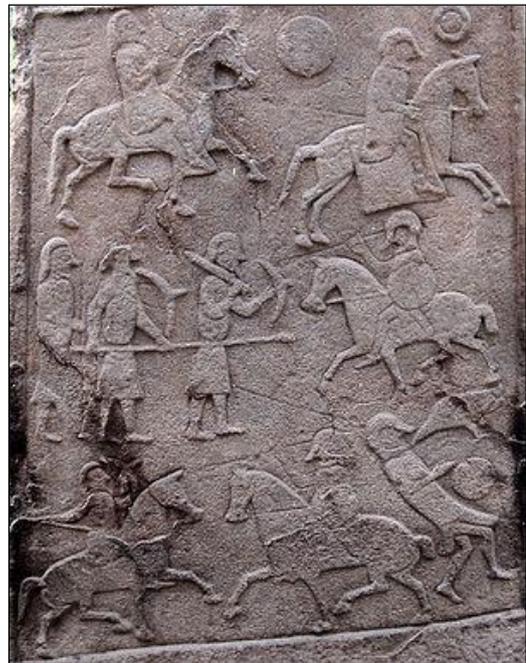
Pictland remained independent for the next 400 years and recorded the succession of 50 kings, despite many internal disputes. Probably recalling their experiences against the Romans, Pictland's clans and minor kingdoms remembered how to unite and fight whenever threatened.

In 685 AD, for example, they came together under Bridei mac Bili of Inverness, King of the Pictish Kingdom of Fortriu, to annihilate the invading Angles at the Battle of Dunnichen (see commemorative plaque right).

The battle site is now believed to be at Dunachton, near Kingussie in Badenoch. The Pictish ancestors of Clan Chattan and Clan Macpherson were almost certainly involved in the slaughter.

It will be explained in the next chapter that Pictland formally ended in 847 AD when Kenneth MacAlpin united the Kingdom(s) of the Picts with the Kingdom of the Scots.

The Picts were thereafter expected by MacAlpin to blend with the Gaels that continued to migrate from Ireland over the next 300 years, not an easy process. Among these Gaels was Gillichattan Mohr, the first known ancestor of Clan Chattan and Clan Macpherson.



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