

The Romans in Shetland

“They came, they saw, but they didn’t conquer”

A new perspective on the Roman invasion of Scotland from
AD 79 to AD 84 the circumnavigation of Northern Britain
and whether the Romans actually set foot on Shetland

Researched and Compiled by

Ms. Kerrie Meyer

The Shetland Metal Detecting Club & Historical Society

www.smdchs.co.uk

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For over 200 years historians, scholars and lay people alike have speculated whether the Romans actually set foot on Shetland.

In the 1822 publication of *“A Description of the Shetland islands, comprising an account of their Scenery, Antiquities and Superstitions”*, by Samuel Hibbert M.D., F.R.S.E., &C., stated, *“West Voe and Sumburgh Head, which we leave to the south (Dunrossness); this ground is rendered somewhat interesting by the evidence which it has afforded of a Roman visit to Shetland. About forty years ago (circa 1782), I possess a note to the same effect in Mr Low's handwriting of the late Reverend George Low that a copper medal of Vespasian, the reverse Judaea Victa had been formerly found at Dunrossness and is recorded to have turned up by the plough. I have seen, among other coins, a copper medal, bearing the inscription of Ser. Galba Imp. Cass. Aug; another of Vespasian, and a silver coin of Trajan”*.

Hibbert goes on to say, *“Roman antiquities found at Dunrossness was documented by Mr Ross, (late of Lerwick,), who was at considerable pains to collect all the remains of antiquity which fell in his way, that were found in Shetland”*. Hibbert states, *“I have examined several of the coins that are said to have been found in different parts of Shetland, which were those of Galba, Aelius Caesar and Trajan. In one district, Northmavine, a Pugio (small Roman dagger) was reported to have been discovered. There are also small fortifications occurring in different parts of the country (notably in Fetlar), which manifest striking marks of a Roman construction”*.

The mention of 'small Roman fortifications' may be fanciful, but the Romans would have indeed needed to set-up camp (as they always did), so combined with the evidence of Roman coins, Roman medals and a Pugio dagger, Hibbert's comments should not easily be dismissed.

Adding to the intrigue, Roman coins have been found on Fetlar when two late Roman "small brass" coins were found by the Rev W C Carson in Fetlar manse garden between 1924 and 1933, at a depth of two feet. They were of Constantine the Great and Constantius II, both in good condition. Prior to October 1968 a rather worn sestertius of Hadrian was found on Unst. In Yell two Roman coins were found - one a worn dupondius of Hadrian, and the other a worn bronze coin of Justinian I (AD 527 to AD 565).

Naturally, one might conclude these items were merely traded over a long period of years and were eventually lost to the soil, but the dating of the earlier Roman finds (AD 68 to AD 138) are significant as you will discover.

There are three significant clues these finds of Roman antiquity were not simply the result of so-called trading, but were indeed the result of the Romans visiting Shetland – not just once, but perhaps on several occasions.

Firstly, the earlier discovered coins of the Emperors Galba (AD 68 to AD 69), the Vespasian (AD 69 to AD 79) medal and a Trajan silver coin (AD 98 to AD 117) and Hadrian (AD 117 to AD 138) all date from AD 68 to AD 138. The copper medal found in Shetland was none other than (Lucius) Aelius Caesar whose bearing on one side the name of L. /Elius Csesar, and on the reverse "Pannonias Curia A E L". Aelius Caesar was the adopted son and intended successor of Roman Emperor Hadrian, but never attained the throne.

One might ask why most of these early Roman coins and artefacts were found over 200 years ago, but very few recorded in modern times? Two centuries ago much of the land was used in growing crops, such as neaps and tatties. With no mechanisation, the land was both ploughed and tilled by horse and hand, so with close human contact with the soil, the possibility of finding artefacts was greatly enhanced.

On the other hand, Roman coins and other articles may have been repeatedly found by persons ignorant of their real value, and sold as mere metal by their weight, without regard to their age and character.

Secondly, although the earliest Roman coins used in Scotland were introduced by the Roman provinces of Britain that were obtained from trade with the westernmost outpost of the Roman Empire, there is no concrete evidence coinage as a currency was used in Shetland some 1,900 years ago.

Thirdly, and perhaps the most important clue that many of these early coins dates coincide with the conquering of northern Scotland by the legions and fleets of Gnaeus Julius Agricola (Roman governor of Britain 77–84).

Publius Cornelius Tacitus in his famous biography of his father-in-law, *"The Agricola of Tacitus"* explains, *"But there is an immense stretch of land which runs out and tapers off like a wedge, the shore-line of which is absolutely the furthest of all. Round this shore, washed by the remotest sea, a Roman fleet now for the first time sailed, and proved Britain to be an island, at the same time that it discovered the previously unknown group of islets named the Orkneys, and subjugated them. Thule (Shetland) was also sighted, though only in the offing, as the fleet had orders to go no further, and winter was approaching"*.

Tacitus (X11) appears to allude the Romans knew all about the far north of Britain – and perhaps further north than Orkney or perhaps even Shetland. In Tacitus (X11) he explains, “*The nights are not dark, and in the extreme north of Britain they are so short that scarcely any interval is discernible between twilight and dawn. It is even asserted that the sun's light is visible all night if no clouds intervene, and that he does not set and rise, but travels across*”.

In Hibbert’s account he states, “*It is to be remarked, that two of the islands of Shetland, Foula and Fair-Isle, are to be seen from Orkney; accordingly, it has been with every reason supposed, that the Thule which Agricola saw from thence could be no other country than Shetland. “Dispecta est et Thule quam hactenus nix et hiems abdebat.”*

In ‘*Tacitus, Thule and Caledonia*’ by Stan Wolfson published in 2008, his journal (a very heavy read!) is totally dedicated to his theory the Romans did indeed reach Shetland. He extensively catalogues the achievements of Agricola's navy, (apparently understated by Tacitus); with the proposition the Roman fleet reached the furthest limit of the known world, Thule, or Mainland, Shetland, where it located a convenient anchorage, possibly in Lerwick harbour.

Reverting back to Tacitus’ account that Agricola’s naval fleet who, “*went no further (than Orkney) because winter was approaching*”, he neglects to say where Agricola’s naval fleet (or part of his fleet) was located *prior* to conquering Orkney or where his navy was *after* leaving Orkney and exactly where it was located during the following spring and summer.

Accordingly, based on Tacitus accounts, many historians have concluded that Agricola’s naval fleet reached and conquered Orkney *after* his formidable battle at 'Mons Graupius' near Dunning in Perthshire that most likely took place in AD 84. Agricola’s Ninth Legion of 8,000 auxiliary troops, a cavalry of 3,000 with another 2,000 held in reserve and two more legions of 5,000 troops, totalling around 23,000 men, faced down 30,000 Caledonians.

Although many historians believe that after the battle Agricola’s legion marched northwards to the Moray Firth, then set off to Orkney, it seems unlikely that after such an arduous and fierce battle Agricola would have taken his fleet north to Orkney leaving his Ninth Legion alone on mainland Scotland. This scenario becomes even more unlikely especially when the Emperor Domitian recalled Agricola to Rome in AD 85 where he finally retired.

If indeed Agricola's naval fleet ventured northwards and came to Orkney, it is likely they had been there before – but during a previous circumnavigation of the north of Scotland as mentioned by Tacitus in his journal.

Based on inconsistencies in Tacitus' account and the evidence presented thus so far, I have concluded a subjective hypothesis, if not controversial alternative version of events.

During AD 79 to AD 80 Agricola's legions marched north after their conquest of Anglesey (Wales) in AD 79 building forts and temporary camps, they were escorted by his Roman naval supply fleets that sailed up the west coast of Britain. Agricola's land based legion finally arrived in Carlisle AD 82 crossed the Firth of Clyde by ship and set up camp on the Galloway peninsula where the Roman naval fleet was moored. Ireland may have been Agricola's goal, but it's said his legion never set foot on the emerald isle.

Interestingly, Roman coins in great abundance have been found in Ireland and the possibility of a Roman invasion has been much debated. Dr Richard Warner, formerly of the Ulster Museum, has postulated that a large force of Romans or 'Romanised Britons' may have invaded Ireland in the 1st century AD, probably through the southeast.

Though the Romans apparently never had any permanent station in Ireland, they were well acquainted with its geographical position, its passages, and its harbours, as we learn from the unquestionable testimony of Tacitus; and though this and other testimonies were wanting, it might be fairly presumed that the Roman fleets which encompassed Great Britain, sailed beyond the Orkneys, and boasted that they had arrived at the Ultima Thule, could not be ignorant of Ireland and its coasts, though not induced by the spirit of commerce or adventure. The mariners would sometimes be tempted to land, if not to repair their shattered vessels, to procure wood, water, and provisions.

After Agricola's legions marched northwards from their victories in Anglesey (Wales), it was during Agricola's time in Galloway in AD 82 on the west coast of Scotland the infamous mutiny by a cohort of Usipi conscripts undoubtedly took place.

In this episode, Tacitus describes how a cohort of Germanic Roman auxiliaries revolts, and killing their Centurion commandeered three Liburnian (Roman) ships.

In an effort to return home to Germania they navigated northwards (in order to evade the rest of the Roman naval fleet?), and circumnavigated Scotland, which must have taken them past Cape Wrath and onwards to Orkney and the North Sea and *possibly* Shetland? (In modern times the mutiny was well documented in 2012 by Kyle Khellaf in his Thesis, “*Circumnavigating Tacitus’ Agricola: Mise En Abyme and the Munity of the Usipi*”)

Even more striking is how the strange misadventure plays out. With only one captain remaining after the uprising, a series of raids on and skirmishes with coastal Britons ensues. The destitute cohort resorts to cannibalism, and the tiny contingent, which makes it back to the Rhineland, is taken hostage by other Germans and sold into slavery.

What Tacitus does say is that Agricola learns of the Usipi mutiny (and even admires their courage) discovers their journey past the far north of Scotland, and either he or his ship(s) eventually circumnavigates the north of Britain, “*proving it was an island*” (how Agricola learns the Usipi actually circumnavigated around the north of Scotland remains somewhat of a mystery).

Unfortunately, as far as Tacitus’ account is concerned, the chronology doesn’t always seem to fit.

Firstly, Tacitus fails to mention the actual date of the mutiny or the location of where it took place, making his account of these events leading up to the Battle of Mons Graupius unclear to say the least. (In fact, Dio dates the Usipi mutiny and Agricola’s march north as early as AD 79 in the reign of Titus).

Secondly, this has led a few historians to believe the first contact with Orkney occurred *after* the Battle of Mons Graupius in circa AD 84 and that the Usipi mutiny occurred on the east coast of Scotland. After all, the Usipi’s aim was to return to Germany, so if a mutiny took place on the east coast of Scotland, then any circumnavigation of the north coast of Scotland would not have occurred and Agricola’s inspiration to voyage further northwards and ‘circumnavigate Britain’ would never have happened.

However, contrary to Tacitus, the voyage north would most likely have taken place during the summer between AD 82 and AD 83 in a clockwise direction from Galloway and the ‘circumnavigation of Britain’ was completed finally arriving first at Orkney then onto Shetland via Fair Isle.

In the first mention of the Roman circumnavigation, Tacitus describes how the Romans under Agricola's governorship not only discovered that Britain is an island (*tunc primum Romana classis circumvecta insulam esse Britanniam adfirmavit*, Agr. 10.4), but also came upon nearby islands **up to that time unknown** and as a result of discovering them were able to conquer them (*ac simul incognitas ad id tempus insulas, quas Orcadas vocant, invenit domuitque*, 10.4).

It's also hard to conceive the remaining Roman fleet didn't immediately pursue the cohort of Usipi mutineers. In order to supply and feed Agricola's huge marching legion more than three ships and crew must surely have been available at the time. Or, perhaps they did pursue the Usipi and 'accidentally' circumnavigated the North of Scotland and discovered Orkney.

At the greatest extent of the Roman Empire, its frontiers stretched for more than 5,000 km and across three continents and conquered many tribes and peoples.

Typically, the Romans were conquerors, but in order to conquer they would often dispatch small numbers of expeditions of '*Speculatores and Exploratores*', who were the scouts and reconnaissance element of the Roman army. Once they had reconnoitred a new area, often making contact with the local people, a '*Centuria*' that was made up of ten *contubernium*, being a total of eighty men commanded by a Centurion was dispatched, often accompanied by a detachment of cavalry.

Their ultimate goal was conquering by stealth – and if necessary, finally by force. These tactics along with other means is what made Agricola's campaign in Britain so successful. He was very resourceful Roman.

Supply vessels were also vital to his campaign that supported the marching Roman legions heading northwards in Britain from AD 79 to AD 84.

The type of Roman vessel used mostly in the seas and estuaries surrounding Britain was called a Liburnian. This vessel was 109 ft (33 m) long and 5 m (16 ft) wide with a 1 m (3 ft 3 in) draft and had two rows of oarsmen pulling 18 oars per side. The ship could make up to 14 knots under sail and more than 7 knots under oars.

These Liburnians and other small galleys also patrolled the rivers of continental Europe and reached as far as the Baltic, and were extensively used to reconnoiter, fight local uprisings, assisted in checking foreign invasions, and of course acted as supply vessels to the marching legions particularly around the coast of Britain.

The Greek explorer Pytheas is the first to have written of Thule, doing so in his now lost work, *On the Ocean*, after his travels between 330 and 320 BCE described Thule (possibly referring to Shetland) “*as lying six days’ sail north of Britain, near to the Frozen Sea*”.

Thule to the ancients didn’t necessarily relate to Shetland and simply meant ‘*beyond the ‘borders of the known world’*’, so Pytheas in this context of Thule being ‘*near to the Frozen Sea*’ could have been referring to Iceland, northern Norway or even the Baltic, which may well have taken six days to sail to from Britain. Regardless, the ancients knew of many lands and islands that became mythical legend during the time of the Romans.

A Roman liburnian vessel setting off from the most northerly point on Orkney (North Ronaldsay) without sail using just oars alone could achieve up to 7 knots (8mph). Taking wind, tide and currents into account, the time it would have taken in fair weather to travel 90 nautical miles to Sumburgh in Shetland would conceivably take no more than 2 days.

Under full sail, a liburnian vessel had the capability of making up to 14 knots (16mph), so the same journey would have taken no more than 15 hours to reach the southern tip of Shetland. A Viking longboat voyaging from Kirkwall to Lerwick (100 nautical miles) even at 5 knots (without tacking) would have taken just 20 hours.

Almost a thousand years after the Romans, Vikings crossed the North Atlantic via Iceland and Greenland to L’Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, Canada; so it would have been an easy enough voyage for the Romans to sail to Shetland and return to Orkney or the mainland Scotland!

Leaving Orkney, Agricola’s navel fleet would have had Fair Isle in their direct line of sight. If they wanted to investigate the small island the only place they could have moored, and that is only during the summer time, is the small cove on the eastside of the island today named North Haven – capable of containing only one or two vessels at a time.

Another reason for supporting their voyage to Shetland took place during the summer months was not only the long hours of daylight, but within the 20 mile channel between Orkney and Shetland spring tides run at a rate of up to 7 knots, but in the summer, including neap-tides, can be as little as 3 knots.

Once arriving at Shetland the first sight the Roman vessels would have seen is the headlands of Sumburgh and Fitful. Although Quendel Bay would have been a logical place to moor their vessels, if they continued to sail up the east side of the island they may not have been aware this bay existed. In addition, the waters being turbulent around Sumburgh Head and the possibility of many locals who may have appeared to see such strange craft could have deterred the ships from making immediate landfall.

The Romans were excellent seafarers and with perhaps a limited number of men on board, would have instinctively been aware of such hazards. The often-calmer waters of the east coast of Shetland at that time of year would have been a more favourable course for the ships to take.

As they sailed up the east coast towards Grutness Voe (a possible landing spot) and continued on passing the rugged coastline they would have clearly seen No Ness, Mousa and Bressay in the distance. It was not until they came to the quiet and inviting channel between Levenwick Ness & Cumlewick Ness they would have found a safe haven at either Levenwick Bay or Channerwick Bay to moor their ships. The water was calmer and offered depths of between 4 and 12 fathoms – an ideal moorage for two or three Roman liburnian vessels.

If they had moored in Channerwick Bay the first thing they would have seen is hills to the left and in front of them a small burn with a small valley and burn to their right. This area would have been an ideal to gather fresh water and investigate further. Climbing a hill and following one of the burns, they would have finally seen the west side of the island. The Romans preferred a good elevation to set up an encampment, and as they did perhaps they offered a few coins and other personal items to their Gods as a gift for their safe journey.....

This where my account of the Romans in Shetland ends – but not quite!

The key to my narrative is based on the coins and artefacts found on Shetland, Tacitus' account of Agricola's exploits together with other subjective evidence such as the Usipi mutiny which may or may not be related to a Roman visit to Shetland.

Most interesting of all is an area a mile or so from Channerwick where Roman coins and artefacts were discovered over 200 years ago, together with finds from other locations in Dunrossness. These finds coincide with the exact dates Agricola conquered northern Britain and, as I've proposed, made a yet unknown voyage to Shetland – whereby for a number of years after other Roman expeditions may have followed.

Aided by aerial photography, theoretical data and combining past Roman finds, a group of avid local historians and experienced metal detectorists using top of the range equipment have gained permission to field walk and detect on certain 'areas of interest'. Our aim is to discover empirical evidence that may help to prove the Romans did arrive in Shetland, set-up an encampment, made offerings to their Gods with coins and other artefacts, and that those offerings and any 'lost artefacts' remain in the ground of Shetland today.

That the Romans may have actually visited Shetland almost 2,000 years ago is a compelling story, but it will remain just a theory unless it can be proven the Romans did indeed set foot on Shetland - and perhaps more than once.

If we are successful, then the history books of our small and remote island will need drastically rewriting.

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Ms. Kerrie Meyer
Trollhoo
Rerwick

Shetland Metal Detecting Club & Historical Society
Website: www.smdchs.co.uk

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Agricola Timeline

The timeline below is what many historians believe and is based upon the accounts of Tacitus. However, there is a great deal of controversy regarding many of the dates and the sequence of events.

- AD 40 Gnaeus Julius Agricola born at Forum Julii, Transalpine Gaul, son of Julius Graecinus, a senator who is shortly afterwards executed by Caligula for refusing to prosecute one of the emperor's personal enemies, and Julia Procilla.
- 41 Assassination of Caligula, who is succeeded by Claudius.
- c.52 Agricola moves with his mother to Marseilles for his education.
- c.59-c.61 Serves in Britain as a senior military tribune under the governorship of Suetonius Paulinus.
- 61 Revolt of Boudica and her defeat by Paulinus.
- c.62 Agricola marries Domitia Decidiana, of an illustrious family from Transalpine Gaul.
- c.63 Birth of a son who dies in infancy.
- 64 Quaestor.
- 64/65 Birth of his daughter Julia.
- 66 Tribune of the people.
- 68 Praetor. Death of Nero. Galba commissions Agricola to investigate malpractices in regard to gifts to temples.
- 69 Year of the Four Emperors. Early in the year Agricola's mother is murdered on her country estate by rampaging sailors. He decides to throw in his lot with Vespasian. After the death of Vitellius, Licinius Mucianus, Vespasian's representative in Rome, assigns Agricola to command the difficult Twentieth Legion in Britain, under the governorship of Vettius Bolanus, Vitellius's appointee.
- 70-74 Serves mainly on the northwest frontier in Britain, latterly under Petillius Cerialis (governor 71-73/4).
- 74 Elevated to the nobility by Vespasian and appointed governor of Aquitania.
- 77 Marriage of his daughter Julia to Cornelius Tacitus.
- *78 Is suffect consul and is appointed by Vespasian as Governor of Britain, with four legions under his command. He completes the conquest of North Wales and Anglesey.
- 79 Exploratory expedition into Scotland. Death of Vespasian and accession of Titus. Agricola spends the winter on administrative matters, probably from London.

- 80 Agricola crosses the Forth and campaigns as far as the Tay estuary.
- 81 He consolidates the gains made so far, and establishes military installations along the line between the Clyde and Forth estuaries. Death of Titus.
- 82 Agricola in Galloway. He contemplates the practicalities of invading Ireland. Conjectural visit to Rome during the winter.
- 82-83 Mutiny of the Usipi, who set sail from the west of Scotland, and are finally wrecked off the north German coast. Domitian commandeers 500 men from each of Agricola's legions plus an additional 1000 from the Ninth for his German campaign. In return, Agricola is authorised to raise auxiliary companies in southern Britain. He makes a combined land and sea push beyond the Tay.
- *84 Death in infancy of a son, born the previous year. Agricola defeats the Caledonian confederacy at Mons Graupius, using only his auxiliary troops. Following the battle Agricola is recalled to Rome by Domitian. Before marching south again, he penetrates as far as the Moray coast and orders a unit of his fleet to circumnavigate Britain.
- c.85 Awarded the *ornamenta triumphalia*.
- 93 Death of Agricola (23 August), without having served in another post. His will divides his estate between his widow, his daughter, and the emperor.
- 96 Death of Domitian.
- 98 Publication of Agricola, Tacitus's biography of his father-in-law.

*The military actions of Agricola in Britain, and their sequence are based on Tacitus's account. There is some controversy as to whether the campaign took place in 78-84 or 77-83 and if the circumnavigation took place much earlier than AD 84.

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