



This battle was researched and assessed against the criteria for inclusion on the Inventory of Historic Battlefields set out in Historic Environment Scotland Policy Statement June 2016 <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/advice-and-support/planning-and-guidance/legislation-and-guidance/historic-environment-scotland-policy-statement/>.

The results of this research are presented in this report.

The site does not meet the criteria at the current time as outlined below (see reason for exclusion).

## MONS GRAUPIUS

Alternative Names: None

Late 83 or 84 CE

Date published: July 2016

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### Overview

The Battle of Mons Graupius is the best documented engagement between the Roman forces, stationed in southern *Britannia*, and the Caledonian tribes of the northern part of the island. It marked the culmination of multiple years of campaigning by the Roman governor of the province, Gnaeus Julius Agricola, against the “barbarian” tribes and he inflicted a resounding defeat on the confederacy of Caledonians arrayed against him.

Much of what is known about the battle is contained within the *Agricola*, written in 97-98 CE by Agricola’s son in law, the Roman historian Tacitus. This is a heavily biased and only partially surviving account which amounts to a veneration of Agricola. There are no indigenous accounts of the battle and no archaeological evidence has been confirmed as connected to the conflict. Although the site has drawn attention from academics since antiquarian times, the precise date, location and the vast majority of details of the engagement remain unconfirmed.

### Reason for exclusion

There is no certainty about the location of the battle, and there are also significant questions about the accuracy of the accounts describing it. There are a range of suggestions for the possible site, which are spread across a very large geographical area, but none of these are conclusively supported by the available physical evidence, and it is hence impossible to define the battlefield on a map at this time. In the event that evidence is found that would confirm the events and allow the site to be located with a degree of accuracy, the battle is of sufficient significance to be included in the Inventory.



## Historical Background to the Battle

Mons Graupius was the culmination of two years campaigning against the tribes north of the Forth – Clyde isthmus. The Caledonii were the last British tribe to remain unconquered by the Romans (and were never fully subdued). After many years of avoiding a pitched battle, instead striking at the Romans using guerrilla tactics, they were eventually forced into a large scale battle because the Romans marched on their main granaries just as they had been filled from the harvest. The Caledonians had no choice but to fight to protect them, or they would starve over the next winter.

According to the account given by Tacitus, Gnaeus Julius Agricola, who was the Roman Governor of Britain and Tacitus' own father-in-law, was seemingly determined to end Caledonian resistance entirely. With this in mind, he sent his fleet ahead to panic the Caledonians, while he advanced with an army of light infantry reinforced with British auxiliaries, until he encountered the enemy army at Mons Graupius. The Roman force appears to have been significantly outnumbered by their enemies, and Tacitus was forced to stretch his line dangerously thin to avoid being outflanked.

Despite a great deal of individual bravery and the numerical superiority of their force, the Caledonians were rapidly defeated in the resulting battle, as they were no match for the well trained and highly disciplined Roman force. While the battle was undoubtedly a significant defeat for the northern tribes, the region would never be entirely brought under the control of Rome, though they were able to occupy the area south of the Forth and Clyde for a considerable period of time.

## ***The Armies***

Roman: The Roman army engaged at Mons Graupius appears to have comprised a significant proportion of the Roman forces in Britannia at the time, possibly almost all of them. The commander was the Roman Governor of the Province, Gnaeus Julius Agricola and the army was composed of a variety of units typical of Roman armies at the time. These included legionaries, a substantial number of cavalry and the auxiliary infantry, on this occasion including at least four Batavian and two Tungrian cohorts and an unknown number of auxiliaries from within Britannia itself.

Caledonian: The Caledonian army appears to have been slightly larger than the Roman force arrayed against them. It comprised a confederacy of allied tribes, who had come together to oppose the Roman incursion. They were led by a Caledonian warrior named Calgacus, of whom little is known but who appears to have been elected into the role by the confederacy. Tacitus does not provide great detail about the make-up of the army, although he does describe the combatants as:

*“young men in their prime and older men still hale and full of vigour, each one with a glorious reputation in battle and wearing the badges of honour he had won” (Tacitus Agricola, 29).*

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It is also stated that the infantry were armed with large swords and small shields, and that there were also an unspecified number of chariots present on the Caledonian side, who are recorded as launching repeated forays against the Roman army before them.

Although the historical sources do not provide much information about the Caledonian tribes, they do all suggest a similar picture of competitive, highly skilled and ferocious warrior chiefdoms, social amalgamation and a democratic process of electing the most accomplished warriors as rulers, not unlike that proposed for some North Gaulish warrior societies.

### **Numbers**

Roman: The Roman force appears to have been between 20,000 and 30,000 strong, including around 8000 auxiliaries who formed the centre of Agricola's front line, 3000 cavalry to guard their flanks, and another 2000 cavalry and Agricola's legions held in the rear as reserves.

Caledonian: Tacitus lists the numbers of the tribal confederacy as at least 30,000 but is unclear how accurate this is, and he supplies no further breakdown of the numbers.

### **Losses**

Roman: According to Tacitus, the Romans suffered only 360 casualties, one of whom was Aulus Atticus, commander of an auxiliary unit:

*“who was borne off into the midst of the enemy by youthful zeal and the mettle of his charger”*

This number seems implausibly low, and is most likely a propagandist attempt by Agricola's son-in-law to honour the general's memory and the superior battle skills of the Roman army. In reality, Roman casualties were probably considerably higher, although as they were victorious they are still likely to have suffered much lower losses than the Caledonians, since the majority of battlefield casualties usually occur on the defeated side as they flee the field,

Caledonian: Tacitus gives a figure of around 10,000 of the northerners killed. However, again, this number may be a fabrication to favour Agricola and cannot be verified by unbiased sources. The Caledonian losses will likely be notably higher than the Roman, for reasons mentioned above.

### **Action**

As the sole roughly contemporary source which describes the battle, much of what we know of Mons Graupius is taken from Tacitus who, as noted above, was writing a triumphal biography of his father-in-law and thus can be expected to have taken a certain artistic license with the truth.

What is clear is that Mons Graupius is the culmination of two years campaigning by Agricola against the tribes north of the Forth – Clyde isthmus and this was requested of him by his superiors in Rome. It is unclear how far

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north Tacitus was able to advance during the first year's campaigning before he withdrew to his winter quarters, but we do know his campaign met with some success. During the first season he also thwarted an attempted night assault by a force of northern tribesmen on the encamped Ninth Legion and that he made clever use of combined operations involving both the fleet and the army to make his advance.

According to Tacitus, in the sixth year of Agricola's term as Governor (either 82 or 83 CE) his infant son died. Tacitus writes that this personal tragedy allegedly acted as a catalyst for Agricola, in the hope that the campaign would provide respite from his grief. In reality, the decision to advance north was far more likely a long planned campaign to continue the efforts of the previous year, but the opportunity to distract himself from his private pain with public action may well have been welcomed by Agricola. Tacitus places the death in the early summer of the campaigning season culminating in Mons Graupius, but this creates a discrepancy, as the battle seems to occur in the seventh year of Agricola's term. Tacitus may have purposely or accidentally placed the battle in the sixth year of Agricola's term, or he may have mistakenly connected the death of his son as occurring in the same year as the battle. Tacitus also claims that the death of Agricola's son is the reason for the late start to the campaign that year, and consequently for the battle occurring so late in the campaigning season, but the delay may simply have been caused by the time required for organising the men and supplies for such an enormous force.

Once the campaign was ready to begin, Agricola launched a two-pronged attack on the north by despatching a fleet to:

*“harry the enemy generally, so spreading extensive doubt and panic, while the army, operating without its usual baggage-train, was strengthened by the addition of the bravest of the British auxiliary units, whose loyalty had been tried through long years of peace; thus Agricola came at last to Mons Graupius, which the enemy had made their base. For the British tribes had in no sense been broken by the result of the previous year's conflict ..... Moreover, at long last they had learned that a common alliance was the only way to ward off a common danger.”*

Tacitus goes on to describe at least 30,000 Caledonian warriors in the army, with more continuing to arrive to join them. Following the literary style of his Greek and Roman predecessors, like Herodotus and Virgil, Tacitus ascribes motivational speeches to their army to both commanders. Tacitus credits the 'barbarian' leader, Calgacus, with the following rousing call to action, reiterating the justness of the Caledonian cause as the northerners prepared to face the enemy Roman forces:

*“There are no tribes beyond to help us, nothing but bare rocks, the cruel sea – and worse than these, the Romans, whose arrogance you will try in vain to escape, whether by compliance or good behaviour. These men have pillaged the world .... If their enemies are wealthy, they indulge their greed, if poor, they lust for glory.....”*

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Agricola himself then gives an equally compelling speech, galvanising his army into battle:

*“It will be no disgrace to have perished at the very limit of the natural world! ..... Have done with frontier wars in Britain, and make this day the glorious crown of fifty years’ campaigning. Prove to your countrymen that, wherever the blame lies for never-ending warfare and civil unrest, it is certainly not with the soldiers of their provincial armies!”*

As they had arrived first, the Caledonians had looked to choose ground for the battle that was favourable to them, and in the end had deployed their front line at the far edge of the level ground between themselves and the Roman army, with the rest of their army deployed behind them on the hillside:

*“...the others, as though linked together in a solid mass, towered over them, all the way up the slope of the hill. Meanwhile, enemy chariots careered across the intervening plain in noisy sallies”*

Concerned that the northerners’ superior numbers would permit them to outflank his forces, Agricola extended his lines, against the advice of his staff, as this also had the effect of significantly thinning his lines.

With the armies deployed, the battle commenced with a long distance exchange of missiles:

*“The Britons used their huge swords and little shields with skill and pertinacity to parry or ward off the missiles hurled at them by our troops and themselves poured down a really heavy barrage; finally Agricola encouraged four cohorts of Batavians and two cohorts of Tungrians to come to close quarters, a form of battle in which our men had a long history of military training but which proved awkward to the enemy since they had such massive swords to wield and only flimsy shields to protect them”*

The Caledonians’ swords were designed for a wide, slashing action which was effective if the enemy was at the end of the weapon’s reach, but made them cumbersome and hugely unwieldy against an opponent who was able to get within closer range. As a result, the weapons carried by the northerners became a hindrance as Agricola’s Batavian troops purposely closed into a tight melee with them, with the Romans bashing at the enemy with their shield bosses and stabbing at their faces and heads. In this way, the northerners situated at the bottom of the slope were overcome and began to retreat uphill. Other Roman cohorts were allegedly uplifted at the success of their comrades and pressed their advantage, killing and wounding many of the enemy as the battle progressed.

Up until this point, only infantry had participated in the battle until this point, but now some cavalry troops became involved. The charioteers who had launched the initial attack upon the Romans were now fleeing the scene, unable to manoeuvre on the steep terrain as the hill rose higher, and some stray chariots and horses devoid of riders ran wildly, in a state of panic, in numerous directions. The Roman infantry troops were also suffering difficulties with the terrain, losing their footing on the slope.



Northern warriors who had remained on the high ground and not participated in the battle, began to now descend from the hill and make their way towards the Roman rear, hoping to encircle their enemy. Anticipating this tactic, Agricola had already despatched his four reserved cavalry units to cut off their attack, scattering the advancing enemy. The cavalry then ceased their ongoing attack and manoeuvred to launch an attack on the main mass of their enemy from the rear.

*“Then indeed, far and wide across the battlefield, there were scenes of frightful savagery; the Roman forces in pursuit, wounding or taking prisoners only to slaughter them when others came their way”*

Tacitus then describes how, as the battle became more chaotic and disorganised, individual characteristics of the Caledonians became obvious, with some fleeing from the Roman onslaught and others throwing themselves into suicidal attacks on their foes. Fallen men and the detritus of battle was strewn across the landscape, yet there were still those among the Caledonians willing to fight:

*“occasionally, even among the defeated Britons there were instances of enraged bravery; for as the fighting got nearer to the woods, the enemy banded together and used their knowledge of the terrain to encircle those of our men who were recklessly leading the pursuit”*

However, Agricola continued to command and keep control of his army, using his light infantry to pursue them into the woods and the cavalry to sweep across more open areas. Eventually the remaining Caledonians began to break and flee, not in groups as they had previously, but in a scattered, uncoordinated rout, and made their way into the remote wilderness. Agricola's men continued to chase down any Caledonians they could find until the light began to fail and pursuit became impossible.

### **Aftermath and Consequences**

As both sides were relatively evenly matched in terms of numbers, Agricola's decisive victory over the Caledonian army was primarily the result of the Roman's supremacy in training, organisation and discipline. The launching of a central infantry assault protected by cavalry on the flanks, with a reserve to counter any outflanking manoeuvres, were well-tested and highly successful tactics often employed by the professional and well-trained Roman military forces.

Confident that the enemy were not regrouping, Agricola withdrew into the territory of the *Boresti* where he took hostages. He continued his route to winter quarters deliberately slowly in order to instil fear into the northern tribes. Meanwhile the Roman fleet is said to have completed its circumnavigation of the island and returned to *Truccullum* at the same time as Agricola's land forces. Unfortunately, neither the location of the lands of the *Boresti* or the port of *Truccullum* is known, and thus provides no further clarity on the location of the Battle of Mons Graupius.



As a result of the battle, Agricola received due honour for his success at the north-western frontier and:

*“Domitian therefore directed that the customary decorations of a triumph, the honour of a complimentary statue, and all the substitutes for a triumphal procession, should be voted to Agricola in the Senate, coupled with a highly flattering address”.*

Agricola’s term as Governor came to an end early the following year, and he left the province and returned to Rome having handed a peaceful and secure province on to his successor. Under the cover of darkness he came into the city and entered the Palace where Domitian greeted him with a perfunctory kiss then dismissed him into the crowd. From then on:

*“to play down his military reputation, distasteful to civilians, he departed into the depths of calm retirement”.*

### Events & Participants

Only three participants in the battle are noted by name. On the Caledonian side, their leader Calgacus is the sole example, and almost nothing else is known of him, although Tacitus assigns him an elaborate speech to motivate his men, as is common in works of this type.

For the Romans, two participants are mentioned by name. The first is the Roman commander, General Gnaeus Julius Agricola. Most of what we know of Agricola comes from Tacitus, but nevertheless we can build a relatively strong picture of his life as a result. Born in southern France to an important family in 40 CE, his career would be inextricably bound to the province of Britannia. He served as a military tribune in the province under Gaius Suetonius Paulinus, before being given his own command in the province for his support of Vespasian’s claim for Emperor. After this command ended, he served as governor in Gallia Aquitania before returning to Britannia in the same role in 77 CE. After being recalled to Rome the year after his victory at Mons Graupius, Agricola retired from public life. He died at his family estate in 93 CE.

The only other person mentioned by name is Aulus Atticus, the commander of a Roman Auxiliary unit who is said to have been killed after he “...was borne off into the midst of the enemy by youthful zeal and the mettle of his charger.” No other information is known about him.

### Context

Northern Britain was well known to the Romans, even before Julius Caesar circumnavigated the island and led exploratory raids in 55 BCE and Claudius’ later successful invasion of southern Britain in 43 CE. The region was considered the end of the natural world and even Agricola’s alleged speech to his troops in advance of Mons Graupius suggests that they would receive immense honour by dying for their country on such a remote battlefield, far removed from Rome, with Agricola saying it will have been:

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*“no disgrace to have perished at the very limit of the natural world”.*

There is not the space here to fully document the Roman campaigns and phases of occupation of Scotland, nor the detailed debate involved, which has been eloquently summarised by numerous authors. Documentary, structural and material evidence confirms two main, but relatively brief, periods of Roman occupation following campaign and conquest and one aborted attempt at conquest, followed by occasional punitive campaigns in the region.

Having been stationed as Governor of Britannia around 77 CE, Agricola consolidated Wales and northern England and reached the Clyde-Forth isthmus around 80 CE. By 82 CE he continued his advance into the north of Scotland. Thus, in the season before the battle of Mons Graupius, Agricola's forces moved up Strathmore, between the southern Highlands and the Sidlaw Hills, where their presence evoked a violent reaction from the regions' occupants including the Vacomangi and Taexali. As his forces separated and he retired to the south of the Forth, Agricola heard about a planned enemy attack and:

*“fearing that the enemy might use their superior numbers and better knowledge of the territory to outflank him, divided his army into three groups and, taking personal command, advanced to meet them”.*

Hearing of Agricola's imminent arrival, the northerners breached the Ninth Legion's camp, stabbing the sentries and then advancing to attack the camp and its occupants during the night. Agricola advanced with his mobile forces and halted the onslaught, driving the Caledonian forces off but he was unable to pursue them through the woods and swamps which they escaped to.

The Battle of Mons Graupius occurs in the campaigning season the following year, with Agricola seemingly determined to end Caledonian resistance entirely. While he successfully defeated the northern tribes at the battle, the region would never be entirely brought under the control of Rome. Following Agricola's departure, Roman troops were transferred out of *Britannia* to deal with troubles on the Danube. From around 87 CE Roman troops gradually withdrew from Scotland to the Tyne-Solway isthmus with only the forts at Newstead and Dalswinton still occupied and by 105 CE these too had been abandoned. Thereafter, all of modern Scotland lay outside the influence and authority of the empire until 139 CE. Prior to this, in 122 CE, military disturbances brought the Emperor Hadrian himself to Britain and he commissioned the construction of Hadrian's Wall across the Tyne-Solway isthmus to separate the Romanised south of Britain from the 'barbarian' tribes in the north.

By 139 CE, Antoninus Pius had ordered the abandonment of Hadrian's Wall and advanced north into Scotland to drive back the 'barbarians' once again. He ordered the construction of a new mural barrier across the Forth-Clyde isthmus to begin. The Antonine Wall was completed by 149 CE, and following completion some forts were revised in design while others had annexes added. However, by 158 CE the decision was taken to abandon the wall and just ten years later all Roman troops had withdrawn behind the newly refurbished Hadrian's Wall. The literary sources are thereafter silent on the

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subject of Caledonia until around 181-4 CE when Dio Cassius (LXXII) records incursions by the northern tribes across Hadrian's Wall itself.

The Emperor Septimius Severus and his sons advanced to the province and launched another campaign into Scotland in 208 -11 CE. However, Severus died of an illness at York in early 211 CE and, although his sons continued the campaign for a time, they soon made peace with the tribes and relinquished the territories gained. Almost a century passed before Constantius I, now co-Emperor with Maximian, launched Rome's final northern campaign. Roman troops reached the far north of Scotland before withdrawing back to York where Constantius too died and all territories gained were, again, relinquished. Other than some occasional troubles from the Picts and Scots as well as a concerted attack by 'barbarians' from all directions which destabilised the province, Caledonia thereafter slips out of Roman historical accounts.

### Battlefield Landscape and Location

The precise location of Mons Graupius remains elusive. Indeed, many writers have suggested potential locations in Scotland on which this battle was fought. For example, Fraser has recently suggested Dunning in Perthshire and its surrounding landscape as a potential candidate, although no direct evidence currently exists to support his assertion, although this is equally true for the other candidate sites. Other suggestions include:

- a) Duncrub Hill, Perthshire
- b) Meikle Carewe Hill near Stonehaven, Aberdeenshire
- c) Knock Hill at the Pass of Grange, where the Grampians are close to the sea (Burn 1953)
- d) Durno Camp, north of the massif of Bennachie, 30km north-west of Aberdeen (St Joseph 1978, 279)
- e) The broad valley of the Earn in Perthshire (Maxwell 1990)

While Durno Camp is often favoured as the strongest contender due to its close proximity to the Bennachie's steep northern slope, which matches Tacitus' account of the Caledonians appearing over such a landform below a crest on top of several hills (*summa collium*), this proposal remains disputed by other experts.

With the little information available at the current time, it is not possible to identify any of the suggested sites with any certainty as the battlefield of Mons Graupius. However, should new information come to light such an identification may be possible in the future.

### Location

No further information.



## ***Terrain***

No further information.

## ***Condition***

No further information.

## **Archaeological and Physical Remains and Potential**

To date, there are no recorded finds or archaeological evidence directly connected to the battle. However, because of the large scale of the engagement and the nature of the battle, it is plausible that archaeological evidence remains. Tacitus description of the latter stages of the battle would also seem to support this, where he describes the scene:

*“Everywhere you looked there were corpses and weapons, mangled limbs and blood-soaked ground”.*

The combination of ranged and hand-to-hand fighting in a defined battlefield area would result in the deposition of a variety of physical remains. Spent and dropped ammunition, damaged weapons and armour, and personal accoutrements like buckles as well as equipment for horses and chariots would have been lost or abandoned during the action and subsequent flight. While much of this material may have been retrieved after the battle, it is highly unlikely that all remains of the battle could be gathered in this way, and thus the potential remains for such evidence to be discovered in future.

While we know very little about the composition of the Caledonian army, we can build a quite detailed picture of the equipment the Roman forces would have used. As represented in images on Trajan’s Column, during this period Roman legionaries wore helmets strengthened with iron, while their torsos were protected by *lorica segmentata*, a flexible iron mail shirt. They carried curved rectangular shields called *scutum* curved rectangular shields and a uniquely designed javelin called a *pilum*. Auxiliary units had been reorganised by this point to include cavalry and light infantry units, both of which were critical to Roman control tactics between legionary fortresses. Auxiliaries wore *lorica hamata*, a heavier form of armour, similar helmets and shoes to the legionaries and carried flat oval shields.

## **Cultural Association**

At the current time the precise location of the battlefield is unknown, therefore no form of commemoration or interpretation exists.

## ***Commemoration & Interpretation***

No further information



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#### ***Information on Sources and Publications***

All of the contributors to the corpus of contemporary literary evidence regarding the Roman campaigns in northern Britain wrote from a second-hand perspective, derived principally from intelligence gathered by merchants and traders visiting the area or Roman officials assigned to the province during campaigns. Tacitus (*Agricola*) provides the most detailed and relatively contemporaneous version of events; however, his fragmentarily surviving account is an exercise in propaganda, having been written for a Roman readership, and is heavily biased in veneration of Agricola, as Tacitus' father-in-law. Some recent commentators have even suggested that the whole account was a fabrication, though this is probably an overstatement. Other accounts are non-contemporaneous and largely unsubstantiated by other sources and draw much of their information from Tacitus' earlier version, serving as a reminder that caution must be exercised when considering the evidence of ancient historiographers. The battle of Mons Graupius has drawn a great deal of academic interest in the secondary sources, largely because it is so well documented by Tacitus combined with the enigma surrounding the location of the battle.

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