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Abstract

Revised and Excerpted from: "Schoolboy Commentary and Tacitus' Agricola in 19th Century England," a Senior Research Paper submitted to the Department of Classical Studies of the University of Pennsylvania in partial fulfillment of the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors.

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities

Comments

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Faculty Advisor: Cynthia Damon

What follows is loosely abridged from the broader research I did in investigating the commentary for schools (what I have called the schoolboy commentary) as it existed in Victorian England. This is a story of several translations. On the first level it is a study of the schoolboy commentary, a tool for enabling the rote translation that would have occupied much of the schoolboy's academic day. It is also the story of translation across historical epochs. This commentary studies and helps the reader translate Tacitus' *Agricola* written shortly before the end of the first century of the common era. Perhaps most vexingly, it is a story of translation traversing both *synchronic* boundaries—that is, the border between England and Scotland—as well as *historical* national imaginaries. This translation crosses national borders and involves the imagining of the nation across *historical* time. While I don't want to go into this too much, I feel obliged to note also that this is a question of national boundaries within one state—the United Kingdom. Despite all of this, the fundamental translation, I think, is the translation between the grand narratives of nationalism, economic and political liberalism, colonialism (and so on) and an ancient text that becomes crucial to these narratives, all the while being structured around a very different set of values and meanings.

Now, let me backtrack a little bit. The text I'm talking about is Tacitus's *Agricola*. Tacitus was a Roman historian—perhaps *the* Roman historian. The *Agricola* is his first work, dedicated to his morally upright and exemplary father-in-law, Agricola, who was the governor of a peripheral island province called Britannia. and this is the reason that Tacitus, who is famously difficult, is being handed out to children. This is one of the earliest texts we have, along with book 5 of Caesar's *Gallic Wars,* that discusses Britain at length. Placed in the grand historical teleology of the nation, the *Agricola* became a testamentary document to a primordial Britain

otherwise more or less absent from written history and, consequently, a crucial voice from the depths of historical memory, from a time when one just might be able to glean something of the English nation-to-be.

Although the *Agricola* is Tacitus's first work, it is still a product of the author's middle age and a difficult text. The commentary, therefore, is a way of helping these young Latinists read a difficult text in the original. A commentary consists of explanations for difficult grammatical and historical points, generally pulling in examples from other classical texts. Here are some examples, one from the commentary I am discussing, and the other from Cynthia Damon's recent digital variorum commentary on the *Agricola* (fig. 1, fig. 2). We can see that the commentary exists in a discontinuous relationship with its source text. Commentary claims to lie, in a sense, *upon* the text. It draws authority from the one-to-one correspondence implied by the reiteration of commented lemmata— these bolded or italicized terms. By repeating and reiterating the text to be explained, commentary can claim proximity to the original and a purely neutral and explicative relationship to the text upon which it comments. Yet commentary's work of explanation is not entirely simple. Commentaries arise out of a particular historical context and with a particular explanatory interest. In the present study, by focusing on how Roman Britain figures into this commentary upon the *Agricola*, we can begin to understand both the relationship between commentaries and their histories and the status of the *Agricola* itself during the tail end of the Victorian age. And, since we have a limited amount of time today, I'll be honing in on one

Fig. 1: Pearce's commentary. In Pearce (1901).

Fig. 2: Damon's commentary. In Damon (2017).

problem of the commentary: finding the site of the Battle of Mons Graupius in a commentary on Agricola that privileges archaeological evidence over the text itself.

The battle of Mons Graupius is the brief, sudden heart of the *Agricola*. The crescendo of Agricola's campaigns against the Britains, the battle and its immediate aftermath occupy chapters 35 until 38.3. In Tacitus' text it signals Agricola's final victory, his total — and, ultimately temporary, since he is recalled to Rome shortly afterwards— conquest of Britain. In this battle, Agricola hunts down a native uprising, lead by a man named Calgacus, far outside of the territory of Roman control. This is far outside of the confines of the known Roman world. With some exaggeration, this like a battle on the moon.

Now let's begin. A curious correspondence arises between Agricola himself and the audience of the commentary on the *Agricola*. Much like Agricola, the schoolboy would have been from a well-off family, born during a time in which public life would have involved service in a burgeoning imperial administration. Beyond the similarities of elite imperial life even nineteen centuries apart, Tacitus's work itself encourages the reader to identify or sympathize with   Agricola in presenting him as a model of virtue in times of empire. How then does the commentary involve itself in this work that facilitates the reader's involvement on Agricola's side of the story? J.W.E. Pearce's 1901 commentary serves as a prime example of the commentary's involvement in the narrative, counterbalancing Tacitus's favorable view of Agricola with a considerably more critical view of the value of Agricola's achievements in England.

Published in George Bell and Sons' "Bell's Illustrated Classics" series, Pearce aimed his commentary towards the intermediate-level student. As such, the commentary features both an abundance of grammatical explanation and, given the name of the series in which it was published, a suitable abundance of illustrations and maps. In particular, the illustrations of Pearce's commentary both supplement the commentary's work, and embed it within the wider framework of Roman Britain.[1] Pearce "hoped that the numerous illustrations and the examples of inscriptions may stimulate students to try to estimate for themselves the bearing of their local antiquities on the history of the Roman occupation of Britain."[2] Pearce's commentary counterbalances Tacitus's text with a visual representation of the past by giving these illustrative materials part of the task of historical explanation.[3] Moreover, embedded into the text itself (rather than the commentary), they assert their inseparability from the *Agricola* itself.

The first map in the book (fig. 3) depicts Roman Britain. Appropriately, the map does not denote any political borders, but does indicate the geographical disposition of ancient peoples by etching their names in the territory approximately within which they lived. A very few cities and forts are indicated, all by their ancient names: Londinium, Camulodunum, Eboracum. Smaller towns are denoted in a smaller Italic hand, and the map is marked with a number of criss-crossing lines representing Roman roads. Most interestingly, the map does not portray the entire island of Great Britain, but cuts off well shy of the northern bounds of Caledonia (modern-day Scotland). Rather than depict the entirety of the British Isles (as

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[1] My discussion is indebted to Kraus (2016).
[2] Pearce (1901) i.
[3] Keeping in mind, as Kraus (2016) points out, that such paratextual materials are often not under the control of the commentator.

Fig. 3: Pearce's Map. In Pearce (1901).

would befit Agricola's military and strategic aims) or even the entirety of the island of Great

Britain (considering Agricola's actual campaigns of conquest in Caledonia), the map terminates

at two walls: Hadrian's famous wall and the Severan (or Antonine) wall. Furthermore, the map

does not note the extent of Agricola's conquests, or speculate particularly about his ventures

across the island. In fact, there is very little trace of Agricola here. The map portrays an idealized

`Roman Britain of no particular period: construction began on Hadrian's Wall in 122 CE, almost

thirty years after Agricola's death, on the Antonine Wall (or or Severan Wall) not until 142 CE,

almost a half-century after Agricola's death, and 59 years after the Battle of Mons Graupius.[4]

Confined to the territory of what would be modern England and Wales, the map does not

concern itself with Agricola's conquests. From the beginning of the commentary, this method of

presentation situates Agricola's works within a predetermined Roman Britain. That is, the map

shows the reader the landscape to which Agricola's work is germane. This landscape is not all of

the British Isles.

Pearce's introduction to the text bears out this diminution of the wider historical

significance of Tacitus's father-in-law:

> We cannot fail to see even from Tacitus's partial narrative, that the spirit of adventure got
> the better of Agricola's sober judgement, and led him into expeditions on which the
> troops were sorely harassed, without gaining any advantages to compensate the
> expenditure of men or money. After the barren victory at the Mons Graupius in 84 [sic]
> Agricola was recalled… Domitian's perception of the uselessness of these costly
> campaigns, and not envy, was the motive of Agricola's recall. There was, indeed, little
> for Domitian to envy (Pearce 1901: xv)

This is scathing stuff indeed. Domitian (the ruling emperor at the time, who in Tacitus's text is a

brutal tyrant) comes off relatively well in this vision of the *Agricola*. Agricola, rather than being

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[4] Woodman (2014) 332; Birley (2005) 89.

a great and prudent general cut short before he could secure total victory and eternal glory,

becomes a rash agent of empire, far from home and caught up in the exhilaration of military

campaigning. In this depiction of the excess of colonial warfare, it almost seems as if Pearce is

describing the extremely expensive campaigns of the Second Boer War going on in South Africa

at that time.[5] Rather than being shadily offed by a red-faced and envious Domitian (45.2),

Agricola is, so to speak, pensioned off and sent to wile away his golden years in peace. This is

not a glorious conqueror denied his due, but an Agricola whose status as a historical figure is

more incidental than world-historical.[6] In a sense, Tacitus's biography of his father-in-law

becomes a window into the ancient world, one that cannot be presumed wholly unimpeachable.

Following this timeline, and immediately before the text of the *Agricola* proper begins, is

another telling bit of introductory material: "Part of the Roman Wall at Cudy's Craig,

Northumberland" (fig. 4). This circumspect caption is suitably peculiar for this odd inclusion in

the commentary. Rather than immediately informing the reader that this is Hadrian's Wall, the

caption demands some reasoning on the schoolboy-reader's part. This photo does not justify its

relationship with the text. It is not an illustration of anything in particular, and, moreover, it is of

a wall that will be built long after Agricola has departed from Britain and met his end. As the

wall recedes out of sight into the distance, it presents a view of Roman Britain that is essentially

transhistorical. Lacking explanation, the photo does not contextualize Hadrian's wall as a

containment strategy, or as a different model of imperial rule in this distant province. Instead, it

regards walls as a crucial feature of the essence of Roman Britain, artifacts (the "local

antiquities" of Pearce's prefatory note) too. The Romans came; they built walls, they left things.

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[5] Porter (2000) 635.
[6] To speak anachronistically
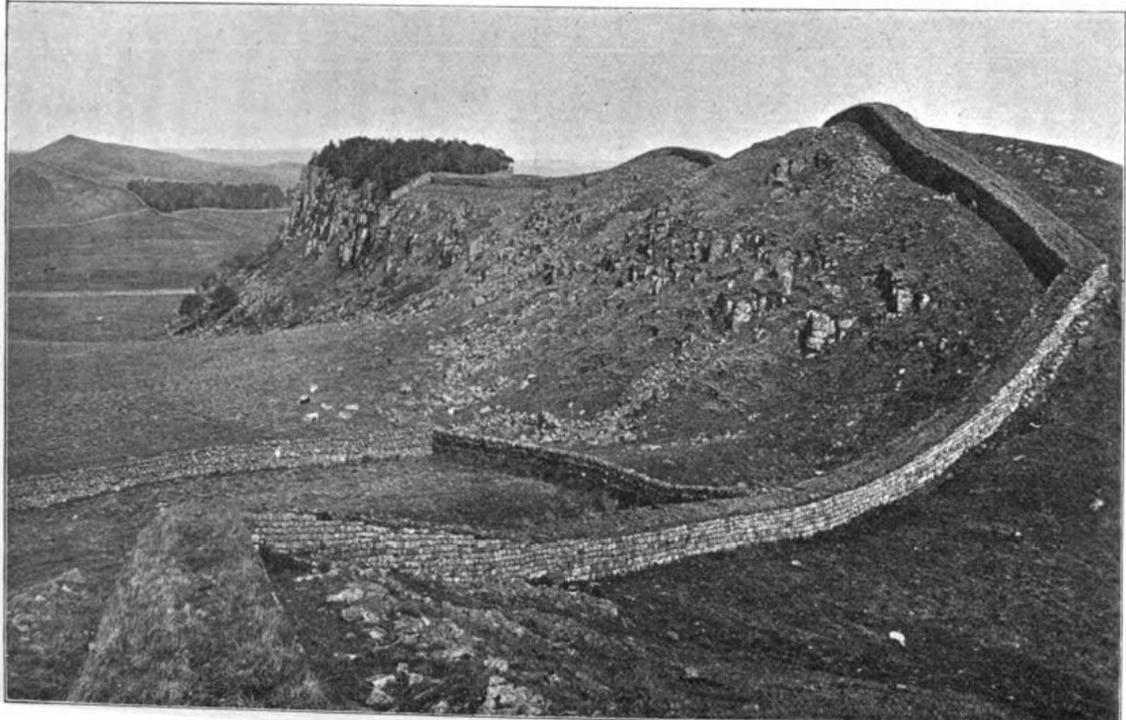
PART OF THE ROMAN WALL. (Cudy's Craig, Northumberland.)   *G. W. Wilson & Co., photo.*

Fig. 4: "Part of the Roman Wall (Cudy's Craig, Northumberland." In Pearce (1901).

They conquered. Agricola's remark that he could subdue all of Hibernia with one legion, thereby depriving the Britons of all sight of freedom (24.3), stands in stark contrast with this vision of Roman Britain as a bounded portion of the wider isles. Pearce's enclosure of Roman Britain within the physical limits of the Roman walls (and their coincidence with the modern border between England and Scotland) limits the possible scope of Romano-British history to the territory of modern England.

In remarking upon Agricola's activities outside of the provided map (that is, his campaigns in Caledonia north of where the Hadrian and Antonine walls would be), Pearce's analysis finds some trouble with the problem of the location of the Battle of Mons Graupius. (*pause*) So we don't actually know where this battle took place. Historians and archaeologists generally believe, however, that it, or battles similar to it, likely did take place.

Pearce identifies a definite location at which the forces of Agricola and Calgacus, leader of the Caledonians, met. Agricola's advance stopped at Delvine, about thirty miles west of Dundee and just north of the River Tay, "where the battle of the Mons Graupius probably took place."[7] This presentation does not entirely diminish Agricola's campaigns, even if the victory remains essentially fruitless (in reiterating this point, Pearce's commentary refers the reader back to his introductory revision of Agricola's historical influence with a laconic "Cf. Introduction, 'Agricola and Domitian.'")[8] Delvine lies more than a hundred miles north of the modern border between England and Scotland, by no means an inconsiderable distance. To compare, Agricola's journey with his force from Eburacum to Luguvalium (York to Carlisle, close to Hadrian's

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[7] Pearce (1901) xxii; this is in the section of his timeline dedicated to Agricola's campaigns.
[8] ibid 91

Wall), approximately the same distance, would have taken roughly three and a half days on a

forced march along known roads.[9]

Yet despite this, Pearce still couches this expedition in words that diminish its effect.

Agricola's advance "stopped at Delvine." Rather than frame Agricola's campaign as an advance

far into an unknown land, Pearce notes the limits of this march into the ancient Caledonian

countryside. Where the speech of Calgacus prior to the battle situates the Caledonians (and, in

turn, the battleground for their desperate last stand) at the very edge of Britain and the known

world (30.4), Pearce notes their march in definite terms, pointing out each modern town that

would have been a waypoint on Agricola's route, and defends it on archaeological grounds.

Rather than in the Caledonian wilderness, the battle took place on known grounds, at

what would be a definite village in Scotland. In his notes on Chapter 29, he remarks: "For the

site of the battle [of Mons Graupius] I have accepted the suggestion of Sir James H. Ramsay. He

traces Agricola's advance by a line of camps of about forty to fifty acres, which would

correspond with the number of his troops."[10] James H. Ramsay was a Scottish baronet and

historian, and he explains his reasoning for situating the battle so in his *Foundations of England*,

a hefty history of England, of which two volumes, covering the time from 55 BCE until 1485

CE, would have been available while Pearce was writing.[11] We are concerned with the first of

these, which was published in 1898. Ramsay's account is more specific than Pearce could allow

in his limited space, but is not founded upon much more convincing evidence. Ramsay

establishes his notes the existence of a set of three camps, two of which he attributes definitely to

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[9] This information is from the Stanford Geospatial Network Model of the Roman World at <orbis.stanford.edu>
[10] Pearce (1901) 82
[11] Ramsay (1898). Ramsay, in his preface, points with particular pride to his localization of the site of the Battle of Mons Graupius.

Agricola's work. His reasoning is that, while there are a number of Roman camps in the area of

Scotland he surveyed, they seem to be of two sizes. The large, he notes, must belong to

Septimius Severus's operations, the small to Agricola's.[12] For contrast, what is now or soon to be

the standard commentary on the *Agricola*, the 2014 commentary of Woodman with Kraus,

suggests two sites, Ben Loyal in the northwestern highlands and Bennachie in Aberdeenshire.[13]

Both of these locations are well north of Delvine, and Ben Loyal is almost as north as is possible

to go in Scotland; that is, Ramsay's account is conservative. While it is still north of where

Pearce's maps leave off, it is not as deep into the furthest reaches of Caledonia as later scholars

might postulate.

Although Pearce cites Ramsay's account as more or less satisfactory, he was also well

aware of the difficulties in interpreting seemingly undeniable archaeological evidence: after all,

in his preface, well before this discussion of campsites and Ramsay's histories, he coyly

references "Scott's *Antiquary*:"[14]

> I must just mention here— what it would be unpardonable to overlook altogether—the claim of the Kaim of Kinprunes to be the site of the battle of the Mons Graupius. Probably not many schoolboys will need the reference to [Sir Walter] Scott's *Antiquary*, ch. iv, for Mr. Oldbuck's famous argument.

Pearce is not understating the popularity of Scott's work. Yet this is a curious prefatory remark,

moving from what seems to be a serious scholarly reference to what is actually a joke. Chapter 4

of Sir Walter Scott's *The Antiquary* was a frequently anthologized work, and issues a remarkable

satire on the limits of antiquarianism as a historical art.[15] In it, Scott's titular Scottish antiquarian

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[12] Ramsay (1898) 72
[13] Woodman with Kraus (2014) 234
[14] Pearce (1901) iii
[15] Raleigh (1963) 8. For discussion of the history of antiquarianism in Great Britain, see Hingley (2008).

Oldbuck proves to a new learned acquaintance that he has found the true site of the battle of

Mons Graupius: the Kaim of Kinprunes, his own property, on which he has found an inscription:

"A. D. L. L. which may stand, without much violence, for *Agricola Dicavit Libens Lubens.*"[16]

(this is a bit of Latin nonsense) Discussion between the two classically-minded gentleman

proceeds with suitable erudition, until Edie Ochiltree, a beggar, passes near and objects.

Ochiltree tells the assembled classicists that the inscription is quite recent, not ancient, and that

the trench that the two believed proof of a Roman camp is, in contrast twenty years old. In fact,

Ochiltree had been privy both to the digging of the ditch and the carving of the inscription at a

bachelor party. (*aside*) I'll spare you my impression of a Scottish accent and translate Scott's

patois. In essence, what transpired is that one of the party-goers had inscribed a stone in joking

tribute to the bachelor Aiken Drum's "long ladle," and fondness for kale soup.[17] In short, the

beggar proves the gentleman an overly-enthused amateur. Oldbuck's analysis of the inscription

is hasty, and he is over-eager to resolve a lasting historical problem for his own

self-aggrandizement. Although Scott was writing before the dawn of the serious and methodical

archaeological study of Roman Britain, his narrative nonetheless complicates the straightforward

analysis of an artifact or historical place. By citing Scott at the very beginning of his work,

Pearce reminds the reader of both the contentious debate over the location of the battle of Mons

Graupius and the difficulty of coming to a satisfactory account. In a sense, all we have to work

with in discussing the account of the battle is Tacitus's description itself; all other suggestions

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[16] Scott (1816) 74

[17] ibid 79-80. To clarify Scott's thick Scottish patois, one of the party-goers had inscribed a stone in joking tribute to the bachelor Aiken Drum's fondness for kale soup. Malley (2001) challenges the view that Edie's account of the origins of the inscription are necessarily correct, but hones in usefully upon the way in which Scott complicates the notion of a straightforward ownership or engagement with history.

must be contingent.[18] Yet there is another layer to the Scott reference. Ramsay's hypothesized site of Delvine lies only twelve miles from his estate at Bamff. Here Scott's novel and the real history lie juxtaposed alongside Pearce's hope that the illustrations of his commentary would encourage students to examine their local antiquities. Both correct and misguided searches for archaeological truth lie close to home.

With the rise of nationalism, the commentator must situate the *Agricola* in a history that has suddenly expanded across centuries. The *Agricola*, which I (along with many critics) would say is fundamentally about a morally upright Roman, becomes implicated in the English search for a sort of historical belonging. As archaeology arose as a privileged means of accessing the classical past, so too did the *Agricola* become interpreted in a manner consistent with archaeological evidence. This is the story of how a set of translations (which link this text to a modern set of discourses, anxieties, and preoccupations) become the precondition for the literal act of translation staged in the pedagogical scene of the late Victorian schoolroom

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[18] Of course, Woodman (2014) brings rather more to the table through a literary analysis of the battle, proving that we do not have solely the text. We have many texts which reflect and refract similar stagings of armed conflict. (28).

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