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Alison E. Grant 2007 *Roman military objectives in Britain under the Flavian Emperors*, Oxford BAR British Series 440, 201pp. ISBN 978 1 4073 0114 3

This critique of the evidence for the Flavian conquest of northern Britain claims to offer an integrated analysis of the archaeological evidence and the documentary sources and offer a new perspective. It is based on Grant's PhD thesis with broadly the same title submitted to the University of Lancaster in 2006.

G. starts with a review of previous work of which she is occasionally highly critical, though she fails adequately to allow for interpretations changing in the light of reassessment or new discoveries. For example, criticisms of this reviewer, whose work, it is suggested, provides a pivotal point from which to move forward, are factually inaccurate in relation to his interpretation of the early dating of Carlisle, the possibility of pre-Agricolan campaigning into lowland Scotland, the evidence for Roman campaigning in the far north of Scotland under Agricola and the date of the Gask 'frontier'.

The integration of archaeological and literary evidence is hardly innovative. What is new is G.'s attempt to use Ptolemy's *Geographia* and the *Ravenna Cosmography* to cast light on military policy in the later first century. Indeed, this is the crux of her thesis and she spends the latter part of chapter 1 and the next two chapters considering these two sources in some detail in an attempt to better understand the political geography of Britain, offering some interesting insights in the process. The basic contention is that place names in the *Ravenna Cosmography* are grouped regionally in relation to indigenous tribal areas and correspond closely with place names in Ptolemy's *Geographia*. However, it is when she attempts to draw wider conclusion from this data and argue that it can shed light on the stages of conquest in the Flavian period that problems arise.

Indeed, the logic remains unclear and the relevance of these two sources for improving our understanding of Flavian military strategy unproven. In the absence of corroboration in the form of epigraphic or other specific literary evidence, any place name identifications are at best speculative. G. assumes that they relate to Roman military establishments, either forts or camps, but this is by no means certain, as the

inclusion of place names in Ireland by Ptolemy should suffice to confirm. Even if she is correct, there is no certainty that the sites identified are Flavian, let alone when in the Flavian period they may have been established, given that Ptolemy's work was published in the mid-second century and the *Ravenna Cosmography* compiled probably in the late 7<sup>th</sup> or early 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, even if one of the primary sources for north Britain may have been a first century military map. Finally, even if the named sites are indeed Flavian military establishments, their correlation with forts or temporary camps provides no more information in relation to Roman campaigning than is already available from the archaeological evidence.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 chart the Flavian advance from Wales and northern England to the north of Scotland as G. perceives it in light of her reassessment. The perspective offered is very much an ancient historical one. Though G. uses archaeological evidence, she is not always rigorous in doing so, adopting that which suits her argument, but feeling free to ignore that which does not, occasionally invoking the principle 'absence of evidence is not evidence of absence' when there is no archaeological support for her position, or finding some supposed authority who seems to offer a view she can espouse, rather than examining critically the actual archaeological data. One illustration should suffice. G. attributes to Richard Gregory the confident attribution of various forts and fortlets in lowland Scotland to the governorship of Petillius Cerealis, but there is no hard archaeological evidence for such an assertion and the actual reference quoted makes no such claim, merely referring to the sites as early Flavian.

Various highly contentious interpretations are put forward. Most significantly the whole process of the conquest and occupation of northern Britain is accelerated. In G.'s account it is Bolanus, not Cerialis who defeated Venutius and occupied Brigantian territory, G. preferring the poetic testimony of Statius to the prose of Tacitus. That Tacitus' account of Rome's relationship with Cartimandua, involving her apparent rescue on two separate occasions, might be confused is ignored and the clear archaeological evidence that Stanwick was her main base rejected in favour of Barwick-in-Elmet, which has little to commend it. Similarly, it is Cerialis, or possibly even Bolanus, not Agricola, who is credited with the original conquest and occupation of lowland Scotland. While there is no doubt that the fort at Carlisle dates to the

governorship of Cerialis and there are indications of additional, but still undated, phases at Dalswinton identified long ago, the remaining archaeological evidence on which G. relies simply will not sustain such an assertion. Nor are G.'s suggested pre-Agricolan forts restricted to the southern lowlands; they extend beyond the Forth-Clyde isthmus to the Gask 'frontier' and the forts at Strageath and Camelon, though here she is clearly following the published views of her PhD supervisor, David Shotter. Assertions of supporting coin and pottery evidence for such early dates are based primarily on a misunderstanding of the characterisation of finds assemblages and how they are used to date sites, and a failure to appreciate the revised dating of some supposedly entirely pre-Flavian fine wares.

Despite accepting in the introductory chapters that place names in the *Ravenna Cosmography* might be either Roman forts or camps, this position hardens when G. is dealing with sites north of the Tay and it is asserted that only forts or semi-permanent works were meant. This is then used to support the view that Agricola constructed such posts in the far north. Thus Roman place names are assigned to sites along the coast of Moray, which the late G.D.B. Jones and C.M. Daniels put forward as Roman military establishments. G. is slightly ambivalent about these sites, but clearly wants them to be at least semi-permanent in character and alludes to them elsewhere as such. She is, however, insufficiently critical of the archaeological data on which this interpretation is based. With the exception of the possible camp at Balnakeith, the various sites in Moray (particularly Thomhill and Easter Gallcantray) lack the distinctive morphological characteristics of Roman military works, either temporary camps or forts, and have not provided any artefactual support for a Roman date despite quite extensive excavation. If they were garrison posts with internal buildings, as the excavators believed, it is simply inconceivable that excavation would not have produced some reasonable quantity of pottery or other artefacts, even if they were only occupied for a year or two. To suggest by way of explanation that they may represent semi-permanent works is to misconstrue the concept. All timber-built forts were potentially semi-permanent. There is no need to invent a new and unprecedented form of military establishment with unparalleled forms of buildings and unusual modes of construction to explain these sites, nor any justification in so doing. Even if incomplete, Roman forts still follow consistent principles of

castramentation and design, as the unfinished legionary fortress at Inchtuthil serves to confirm.

Finally, though recognising that it lies outside the main theme of the volume, G. provides a lengthy consideration of the dating evidence for the British section of the *Ravenna Cosmography* as an epilogue, concluding that the map source on which it was based is primarily of mid-second century date. While this detailed reconsideration of the place name evidence is very useful, the link with the broader analysis of Antonine policy in Britain and further afield which is then offered is less than entirely clear.

G. concludes in the main strand of her work that the place-name evidence in Ptolemy's *Geographia* and in the *Ravenna Cosmography* makes two important contributions to knowledge. Firstly, it helps to clarify the archaeology, particularly in relation to tribal divisions. Secondly, it enables us to construct a deeper appreciation of Flavian military strategy, in which the conquest of what is now Scotland occurred almost a decade before current orthodoxy would allow. In the latter case the arguments are far from convincing. While G. accuses this reviewer's published work as being non-intuitive and relying too much on the archaeological data, the reverse process, historical speculation without a critical assessment of the available evidence, is little more than myth creation.

W.S. Hanson