

Tacitus “Agricola”

The valuable legacy of essays left by Tacitus are usually grouped together under the general heading of “Histories”, but his “Agricola” should more accurately be described as a biography, since its subject matter, the lifetime work and achievements of Gnaeus Julius Agricola, concerned in fact his father-in-law. Tacitus had married the daughter of Agricola in 77AD. Clearly Tacitus had huge respect for Agricola and this work seeks to present the man in the best possible light. We are not talking here of a restrained and objective assessment.

The importance of this work for British Roman historians and archaeologists is that a large part of Agricola’s distinguished military career took place in Roman Britain and this is reflected in this biography. It is the most detailed view of Roman Britain at a crucial time that we have from any Roman author.

Agricola had three separate periods of service in Britain. From circa 58 to 62 AD he served as a tribune in Legion II *Augusta*, probably based at Wroxeter (Viriconium). Since he was here in 61 it is probable he played a part in the suppression of the Boudican revolt.

He returned to Britain in 70, staying until 73/4, when he was commanding officer of Legion XX *Valeria Victrix*. During this period he was able to demonstrate his military skills against the Brigantes in Northern England. Perhaps this was the period when the Roman road from Chester to York via Slack was built and I would like to think that Agricola might at some point in his journeys up and down the country have spent a few nights in the (dubious?) comfort of Slack Roman fort. Certainly Agricola made it clear to Tacitus what he thought of the British weather- **“the climate is wretched, with its frequent rains and mists.”**

The third and most important period was from 78 until 84 when he was governor of the province. During this unusually long tenure, (most governors served for only two years), he completed the conquest of Britannia, firstly gaining control of North Wales and the Isle of Anglesey, and then moving northwards to try to bring Caledonia (Scotland) under Roman control. This campaign took him up to the Aberdeen area, building roads and establishing forts. He fought and won a battle against the Scottish tribes at a place he called Mons Graupius. There is still some debate as to where this might have been and a number of sites have been suggested. The description of this confrontation is given detailed coverage by Tacitus, with a suggestion that there might have been some exaggeration by him to further enhance the reputation of his father-in-law.

What is most disappointing about *Agricola* from the perspective of the Roman historian today is that Tacitus seems totally uninterested in the geography of Roman Britain, the nuts and bolts, we might say, that held the province together. Not one single Roman town or fort is identified. Nothing is said about road building. The focus throughout is on the character of Agricola and lauding his virtues as a soldier and man of honour and principle, often comparing this with the corruption and decadence which he witnessed at the top of society in Rome. We learn about Roman Britain almost incidentally.

The Penguin translation of *Agricola*, which first appeared in 1948, is very readable and contains in its introduction of lot of useful and interesting background material, which could probably do with a bit of updating in the light of the archaeology which has taken place in

the intervening years. This edition also has the text of *Germania* dealing with the trials and tribulations of Rome's attempts to bring the German tribes under some kind of Roman control. In comparison Roman Britain was a walk in the park!



Lead water pipes from Chester bearing Agricola's name.