

Why did rome fail to conquer scotland history essay



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There has been much debate over why Rome failed to conquer Scotland with the traditional view that “ the Roman frontiers are a symbol of abdication and failure” (Mann 1974, 508), and as Mac Gregor put “ We (the Scottish) have in common with the Germanic tribes across the Rhine the distinction of not only stopping, but defeating the Roman armies” (Mac Gregor 1987). However this view is now, with such work being undertaken as the Gask Project, a dated idea of how much influence these Highlanders really had over the prevention of total control of Britain. A lot of the speculation as to why this was relied on the works of Tacitus, however this is not always to be taken as straight fact, due to the Tacitus’ apparent hero worship of his father in law Agricola.

The failure to conquer Scotland often hinged on the interpretation of Tacitus left behind, such as the possible argument that the Highlanders themselves were too warlike to be conquered. However this viewpoint is flawed as the tactics of the Highlanders were at best guerrilla tactics (Breeze 1988) and in the one recorded stand of a pitched battle at Mons Graupius the facts given are inherently biased and the conclusion to the battle was defeat for the Highlanders (Woolliscroft 2000). This argument is again unpicked due to the fact that until the end of Roman Britain itself the provincial army was successful in both defeating each invasion from the north and also in preventing the Picts from conquering the tribes in the Southern Uplands (Breeze 1988). As such it can be said that the Caledonians were not particularly warlike, nor were they ever successful against the Romans (Breeze 1988). Another interpretation which was traditionally used was that of, the highlands were too daunting a prospect for the Romans to conquer.

This was initially backed up by the lack of forts found in northern Scotland and the fact that there were forts blocking off the glens (Ogilvie & Richmond, 1967). However there was very little settlement to be found beyond these glens (Rivet 1966) and as such there would have been little offered if this was a defensive tactic, also these glens could have been easily bypassed much like the Jacobites in 1746. This argument as well as having these flaws also has the major failing that the Romans had had no difficulty in conquering Dacia and the Alps (Breeze 1988). Although the Scottish terrain would have been densely forested which would have hindered communication, there is the obvious conclusion that Rome, if it has so wished, could have overcome this (Breeze 1988).

It is this “ if it so wished” which made the argument that it was not worthwhile economically for Rome to bring Scotland into her empire so appealing to some scholars. This argument is that for Rome to conquer Scotland it would have taken a lot of manpower for an area which would not reap a good taxation and would in all probability lose money due to the forces being stationed there. However the other side of this is that by taking the whole island Rome would have been able to have significantly reduced the size of the armed forces there, due to the fact that Britain is an island and would not have any threats of intimate invasion (Breeze 1988).

This lead Breeze and other scholars to believing that the reason that Rome failed to conquer Scotland must be because of the fact that the political nature of the Roman Empire and the geographical isolation of Britain (Millar 1982) combined with events elsewhere prevented the conquest of the island.

Here the argument is that Britain was a peripheral province and that <https://assignbuster.com/why-did-rome-fail-to-conquer-scotland-history-essay/>

emperors would only attempt to conquer it when all other frontiers were secure. Also when these emperors were secure and a campaign for the complete conquest of Britain was being formulated external events influenced the emperors will so that it could not be undertaken fully. There were only two serious attempts to completely tame Britain, namely that of Agricola and Severus, both of which failed (Breeze 1988). However the failure of these could possibly be accounted, not to the strength of the Highlanders and the defeat of the Roman army itself, but instead external events which lead to the follow up of Roman victories not being undertaken (Breeze 1988). These two external factors were that in 80AD troops were required on the Danube and as such Agricola had troops taken from him in Britain and did not have the possibility of reinforcement. Whereas in 211, the death of Severus meant that the campaign was not continued by his son the next emperor, as such the progress made was lost. Here the political external influence shown helps emphasizes the fact that the progress on the British frontier was determined at least as much by external factors as by local conditions (Breeze 1988).

The geographical isolation of Britain itself would have influenced this political influence and the fact that not emperor was secure for the remainder of the third century after Severus meant that time could not be put aside for Britain. Britain however was itself peaceful at this time and did not pose a threat, and because of this, with some many other more immanent threats on other frontiers during the 4th Century, Rome only maintained Britain rather than looking to expand its territories there (Breeze 1988). These examples aid the argument made that it was the location of Britain and the

external factors which lead to Rome failing to conquer Scotland as much if not more so than the local conditions raised earlier (Breeze 1988). However this argument, although strongly underpinned by plausible external conditions, fails to pick up on the Highlanders themselves and places too much on an impetus on Rome's failing to conquer Scotland because with a reduced army the Scottish would have been too much of a hindrance to conquer. Instead Woolliscroft puts forward this argument; that the hindrance of conquering the Highlanders was ultimately down to economical reasons and that these external factors, although playing a part, are secondary causes not the ultimate reason that Rome failed or as Woolliscroft argues chose not to conquer Scotland.

Breeze in his paper argues briefly that the native infrastructure in North Britain being insufficiently urbanized to support the food supply for the Roman army and the imposed Roman administrative structure could be causes for failing to conquer Scotland. This however would have ultimately been a hindrance and only contributed to a wider issue in a minimal way rather than being a strong influence. However the fact that the North was not urbanized and not as developed culturally as the south, or in fact as many of the Mediterranean cultures Rome was used to conquering, may play a role in another argument which presently has the most momentum behind it put forward by Woolliscroft.

Scotland was not developed enough for Rome to apply its staple conquering stratagem to:

This argument simply is that the native political structure in North Britain was such that Rome could not simply conquer one leader as it had done with

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almost every other nation or tribe it has overcome. For with the removal of the leader or by bending them to Rome's will, Rome did not have to have such a large military presence, and the system meant that there was little change to the mass populous' daily lives. Whereas in Scotland there was a collection of farmlands and small tribes which did not understand the rules and legislation which Rome would seek to impose of them (Woolliscroft 2000). This ultimately meant that Rome could not conquer Scotland without significant man power over a prolonged period of time.

The previous arguments culminated into suggesting that Rome failed to conquer Scotland because with the loss of Legio II Adiutrix, following disasters on the Danube, which would have left the Romans with insufficient forces to hold and push on further into Northern Britain (Woolliscroft 2000). Instead it is now argued that the lack of native political development would have made northern Britain both more difficult to govern and also less of a threat if given up, due to the fact that there would not be one cohesive enemy to fight against. This new argument suggests that the state of the indigenous society is the key factor as to why Rome did not conquer Scotland, because Britain had the largest provincial army and other more hazardous areas in the Empire were being held by much smaller forces (Woolliscroft 2000). Instead the Romans found themselves faced with not just a difficult area with their forces being diminished by external factors. But because of the lack of local institutions which would normally be used by the Roman's to minimise this new burden on resources, the taking of Scotland itself was not a viable prospect.

Thus after the Agricola period of conquest in Scotland, during the consolidation, the Roman's would have been experiencing first hand that the Northern Britain's were not as "civilized" as the Britain's of the South. In fact due to the complete lack of a centralised society with no experience of the governance that Rome had come to expect and, for the most part relied upon heavily to be able to operate, this meant that Scotland could not be simply passed over to a ruling leadership and put under the thumb of Rome (Woolliscroft 2000). Instead the Roman's would have soon realised that to successfully administrate the region it would take vast amounts of manpower to keep check of the small individual tribes on a vast Highland terrain and would not yield any returns as the people did not understand the concept of taxation. Due to the fact that excess manpower was no longer available because of the disasters on the Danube (Hind 1983) it meant that Rome did not simply fail to conquer Scotland as some previous archaeologists have thought. Instead the Romans did not have a vested interest in Scotland due to the lack of benefits not outweighing the dangers and that there was not an excess of resources to be lavished upon conquering the insubstantial threat that was Scotland (Woolliscroft 2000).

Conclusion:

Therefore from all of these arguments it is clear that local factors must have played a very important part as to why Rome did not conquer Scotland. Be it the Highlands being a difficult terrain, the warlike nature of the tribes and the lack of economic riches to tempt the Romans further north. Ultimately it would be a culmination of all these and the external factors present in preventing an all out campaign to bring Scotland fully under control. The

most important issue however was that unlike the other areas which Rome had conquered globally; Northern Britain did not have the structure necessary for integration into the Roman Empire and it is for this reason primarily that Rome chose not to conquer Scotland especially when faced with other slights which would have added to a more difficult campaign that would prove its worth.