R is for ROMANS

This month we delve into Scotland's history with the mighty Roman Empire, and why exactly these elite warriors, who conquered an estimated 21 per cent of the world's population, were unable to complete their conquest of the British Isles, by taking Scotland. Now, the Roman's may have failed to conquer, what we now know as Scotland, three times (!) but this is not to say that there was never a Roman presence throughout the North of Britain during this period, quite the contrary in fact. There is evidence to suggest that Roman armies campaigned as far north as the Moray Firth and we know that Roman fleets battled the wild north sea to reach Orkney. In fact Roman artefacts have been found across the country from the Scottish borders to the Highlands and Islands, representing footprints of this powerful Empire. Nonetheless, it appears that they never stayed for long and were regularly confronted by hostile locals who prevented any form of permanent Roman residence. The big question that has bothered scholars for centuries is; what was unique about this country that made the story of Roman Scotland all about invasion and withdrawal?

Let's set the scene a little, it's 79 AD and Scotland is made up of numerous, independent tribes. The Romans have been a presence in the British Isles since 43 AD and many southern tribes - including the relentless warriors led by the legendary Boudica - have been ruthlessly suppressed. The Roman Governor of Britannia, Agricola, sends a fleet to survey and map the coast of Caledonia. Before long, Roman Legions are walking the shores and scoping out the new mountainous landscape ahead of them. The Romans were now on a mission to conquer the rest of Britannia, bursting with confidence following their many victories across Europe.

Son-in-law to the Roman governor, Tacitus, in his biography of the ruler, *Agricola,* wrote of a great Roman victory at "Mons Graupius", namesake of the Grampian Mountains in the Scottish Highlands, in 83 AD. According to Tacitus, the Caledonian army, led by Calgacus, was 30,000 strong whereas the Roman army was around 11,000, plus reserved legionaries. An estimated 10,000 Caledonians died versus only 360 Roman troops, with the remaining 20,000 Celts fleeing the battle site. The silver lining for the Scottish tribes was the failure of the Roman units to successfully pursue and capture the fleeing enemy.

Agricola wasn't always confronted with aggression from the locals, some Scottish tribes, like many of their southern counterparts, submitted to Roman rule, establishing the Roman *līmes* (border defence) of actual control along the Gask Ridge. However, before any further progress was made Agricola was called back by the Emperor Domition to help Rome resolve military crises in the Rhine and Danube frontiers.

In 122 AD Hadrian's Wall was built between Solway and the Tyne estuaries marking the northernmost frontier of the Roman Empire - a significant portion of which still stands today.

The wall stretched from coast to coast, as a form of defence against the troublesome northern barbarians. This was followed by the Antonine Wall, built by Hadrian's successor, Emperor Antoninus, which pushed the frontier further north between the Firth of Forth and Firth of Clyde, which created a natural pinch point in the land. However, this too was short lived, by the time Antoninus succumbed to his death bed the wall was being abandoned and Scotland with it.

For more than a century, the Romans and Caledonians, divided by Hadrian's Wall, enjoyed relative peace other than the odd border skirmish. That was until some unruly Celts began stirring up trouble again, leading Emperor Septimius Severus to lead a sizable army north to quash the troublemakers in the Stirling, Perth and Dundee areas. The tribes had learned a lot from Mons Graupius and used guerilla tactics to wear down the Romans. Yet again the Romans couldn't establish control in the region and when Severus died in 211 AD, his sons wasted no time in packing up, leaving Britannia and heading back to the warm and sunny climes of Rome.

With the constant and very real threat of a powerful enemy on their doorstep, the Caledonian tribes began to work together and eventually unify into much larger and more organised groups, one of which we are all familiar with, the Picts! As time wore on the Picts grew stronger as Rome weakened, and in 360 AD, alongside the Gaels from Ireland, they launched a coordinated invasion across Hadrian's Wall. Roman legions failed to hold them back and the Pictish armies cut deeper into southern Britannia. The wall was eventually abandoned in 411 AD and the Romans left British shores to deal with the barbarian crisis elsewhere in the Empire.

The reasons behind Rome's failure to conquer Scotland are still hotly debated today, but it is believed that many varying forces were at play. The barbarians in the north may have been a force that the Romans had not encountered before, or maybe the landscape was simply too rough and the conditions too wild. It is often suggested that conquering Scotland simply was not worth pulling soldiers from other, more valuable parts of the Empire for such a small and troublesome region. Regardless of the true reason, Scots will continue to boast about being one of the few peoples to successfully resist Roman domination. This legacy of defiance has become a key part of Scottish identity, a symbol of the nation's enduring spirit and independence.

Image 1: Campaigns in Scotland in the early 80s

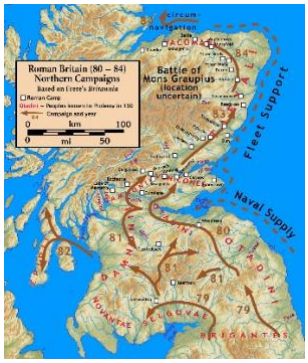

Image 2: Roman cavalryman trampling conquered Picts, on the Bridgeness Slab, a tablet found at Bo'ness on the Antonine Wall, dated to around AD 142 and now in the National Museum of Scotland

Image 3: A section of Hadrian's Wall near Greenhead, Northumberland

Image 4: Notable figures from the Roman period in Scottish history, as depicted by the Victorian artist William Hole, in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.