

ROMAN SCOTLAND

Life on the Edge of Empire



ROMAN SCOTLAND

Life on the Edge of Empire

Fraser Hunter and Rebecca H. Jones

With contributions by

Ian Armit, Diana de Bellaigue, Louisa Campbell, Shannon Campbell,
Cèsar Carreras, Emily Cuevas, Holly Daws, Keming Dong, Emily Freeman,
Martin Goldberg, Nick Hannon, Carolyn Keene, Antony Lee,
Peter McKeague, Richard Madgwick, Arianna Magyaricsová, Sebastian Metz,
Lotte Mitchell, Ella Paul, David Reich, Chris Rynn, Charles Stable,
Bethany Simpson, Jess E. Thompson and Wei-Yuan Yang

ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY



ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD

13-14 Market Square

Bicester

Oxfordshire OX26 6AD

United Kingdom

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-80583-384-0

ISBN 978-1-80583-385-7 (e-Pdf)

© Fraser Hunter, Rebecca H. Jones and Archaeopress 2026

Cover design by Karen Inglis, © National Museums Scotland.

Cover photography and chapter dividers by Neil McLean, © National Museums Scotland.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright owners.

This book is available direct from Archaeopress or from our website www.archaeopress.com

Contents

Timeline.....	iii
Chapter 1. About a Head	1
Chapter 2. ‘Caledonia Stern and Wild?’ A Land and its Peoples	7
Chapter 3. Invading the North.....	25
Chapter 4. Making a Frontier	49
Chapter 5. Roman Inveresk: Fort, Town, and Political Hub	65
Chapter 6. Supplying the Frontier.....	89
Chapter 7. People of the Frontier: Soldiers.....	109
Chapter 8. People of the Frontier: The Military Community	145
Chapter 9. Life at the Edge of Empire	175
Chapter 10. Gods Under the Cricket Pitch: A Temple to Mithras at Inveresk.....	215
Chapter 11. Worlds Colliding: Local Communities and Rome.....	239
Chapter 12. Withdrawal from Caledonia: A Long Endgame	261
Chapter 13. Rediscovery and Legacy	281
Chapter 14. Views of Roman Scotland	299
Appendix: List of Exhibits	305
List of Contributors	323
Acknowledgements	325
Picture Credits	326
Chapter Dividers	327
Glossary of Latin and Unfamiliar Terms Used	328
Bibliography.....	329
Index.....	352



Map of key places and find spots mentioned in the text. (For details of sites along the Antonine Wall, see Figure 4.8 and for other Roman sites in Scotland see Figures 4.5, 4.9 and 12.7. For a distribution of Roman finds from non-Roman sites, see Figure 11.10.)

Timeline

Key people and events mentioned in text (all dates AD):

Emperor	Governor (where named in text)	Key events
69-79 Vespasian	71-73 Cerealis 73-77 Frontinus 77- -84 Agricola	72-73 fort at Carlisle
79-81 Titus		c. 78 fort at Elginhaugh
81-96 Domitian	c. 87-89 Sallustius Lucullus	83 Battle of Mons Graupius c. 86 withdrawal from north
96-98 Nerva		
98-117 Trajan		
117-138 Hadrian		122→ Hadrian's Wall
138-161 Antoninus Pius	138-144 Lollius Urbicus c. 154-158 Julius Verus	142→ The Antonine Wall c. 158 start of withdrawal from Scotland
161-180 Marcus Aurelius 161-169 Lucius Verus	c. 178- c.-184 Ulpus Marcellus	c. 180s campaigns in north
180-192 Commodus	c. 192-197 Clodius Albinus 197-200 Virius Lupus	209-210 Invasions in Scotland
193-211 Septimius Severus		
211 Geta 211-217 Caracalla		305 Campaigns against the 'Picts' 360s Trouble with the 'Picts' 390s Pictish Wars?

1



Chapter 1.

About a Head

Wherever the Romans went, marble followed. Classical marble heads are found across the Roman Empire. They now appear far beyond, from America to China, as later societies traded, exhibited and valued these markers of Roman culture. Many societies that came after Rome have looked to it as a model of empire, of civilisation, of culture or of power. Owning and displaying marble sculpture showed wealth and taste in the Roman world and in more recent times. But many of these marble heads have lost their story: they emerged from the ground in uncertain or deliberately obscured circumstances as sites and burials were looted for valuable finds.

Scotland has one marble head, from Hawkshaw in the Scottish Borders (Figure 1.1). This particular head has a good pedigree; we know where and how it was found, which allows us to tell a good tale. The story starts with clues from the head itself. Marble sculpture was rare in Roman Scotland: this is one of only three known examples, and by far the most impressive.¹ Made of stone imported from the Mediterranean, it showed a powerful Roman citizen, most likely a governor of *Britannia* in the period around AD 100–120.² He would have come from Mediterranean lands, Italy perhaps, or Spain. His family would have been steeped in Roman culture – senators, wearing togas with a broad purple stripe, holding large estates in Italy and elsewhere. *Britannia* would be one stop on a career path that would take him across the Empire.

In the Scotland that the Romans knew, people like him were very rare. The Romans tried and failed at least three times to conquer the land we now call Scotland, but few of the ‘Romans’ on this northern frontier came from Rome, or Italy, or even the wider Mediterranean. In the armies of conquest, the legions were recruited from Mediterranean lands and were citizens of Rome, but at least half the army was made up of auxiliaries recruited from conquered provinces. It is all too easy to imagine Roman soldiers stationed in Scotland staring out at the mist, shivering in the rain and cold, persecuted by midges and dreaming of warm southern lands. But many of the soldiers in Scotland came from

the damp, cold edges of north-west Europe – the Netherlands, Belgium, the Rhineland (Chapter 7). They were well used to weather.

We need to throw out ideas of ‘Romans’ that we have learned at school and seen in a thousand films and television programmes. This was an occupied land. There were no towns, no villas, no grand theatres or circuses. Instead, there were military strongpoints – forts, fortlets, and roads linking them, in a network of control to hold a troublesome land.

It was a military environment, but this is not just a story of men with swords. Around every fort was a settlement of people who travelled with the army – the wives and girlfriends, the children, the people who ran bars, brothels, and taverns, the traders who sold products from around the Empire to their customers on the frontier, the craftworkers who toiled in workshops around the fort to make pots, pins, brooches, tools, and many of the other needs that the fort community had. Some were free, some were enslaved – the Roman economy normalised and needed slavery to keep it running. Few had the legal rights of Roman citizens, though ordinary soldiers could aspire to that if they survived their long service.

This military community served Rome, but was not Roman. People from around the Empire gathered at the frontier in the service of Rome or to support the armies.

But they did not come to an empty land. This was an army of occupation, seeking to conquer people and control territory and resources. Let us return to the cold marble head. Why just the head? Where is the rest of it? The nose has been broken off, the head removed from the body – it was decapitated. It was found some years before 1780,³ not on a Roman site but in the wilds of the Southern Uplands at Hawkshaw, near – well, not really near anywhere. It lies in hill ground in a small tributary of the upper Tweed, more than 7km off the Roman road that ran over Beattock Summit to the Clyde, a line mirrored by the modern M74. This was not an inhabited landscape at the time.



Figure 1.1. Marble head of a powerful Roman from Hawkshaw, Scottish Borders.

Sculpture in strange places demands an explanation (we'll meet another example later, in Chapter 3). We cannot know for sure why it was detached and deposited, but the rather brutal treatment it received suggests it had left Roman hands. The Roman world was not precious about sculptures: they could be reshaped, reused as building material, or disfigured when an emperor fell from favour, but none of those processes explains why this head ended up in the uplands of the Borders. It may originally have stood within the headquarters building of a fort or come from further south. The best explanation for us is that it had come into local hands – a statue beheaded on a raid, perhaps, and taken as a trophy to be deposited in a remote location, perhaps an offering in a sacred spot. Hawkshaw lies in a significant area of southern Scotland: the major rivers of Tweed, Annan and Clyde all rise within a few miles but head in very different directions, to east, south and west. This may have made the area special, perhaps a boundary or focal point where important offerings could be made.

We can never know for sure why it is there; that is the tantalising frustration of much archaeological work. But it reminds us that 'Roman' Scotland had two faces – the invading army and its followers, but also the people already occupying and farming this land. This will be their story as well.

In this book, we will look first at the local peoples in what is now Scotland. We'll then look at the first two Roman attempts at conquering this area, and some of its background and impact. The following chapters

consider matters from the Roman side (though the locals always appear in the story): the making of this frontier security system, questions of logistics and supply, and a view of the military community, from the soldiers to the community living in the shadow of the fort walls. We look at aspects of their lives, beliefs, and how they dealt with death. A key focus is the remarkable temple to the god Mithras found at Inveresk in 2010. We then turn to a local view, considering how they interacted with the Roman world and looking at how this changed through time. Finally, we consider the rediscovery of Roman Scotland from the 16th century and ask why it has proved so fascinating to generations of people. We look at what is still to be found and found out, and leave with a debate over some of the key questions: why did the Romans fail to conquer the area (if failure is the right word); what were the short- and long-term impacts; and what is the legacy of Rome in Scotland today.

This book was written to accompany the exhibition *Roman Scotland: Life on the Edge of Empire*, at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh from 14 November 2026 – 18 April 2027. Its structure follows the exhibition closely, though it pulls in more material.⁴ A list of the objects displayed can be found in the Appendix. This is not the first book to cover Scotland in the Roman period, and will not be the last; it stands in a long tradition of attempts to understand this key period of our past.⁵ What we hope makes it different is its strong focus on the material world – the objects that survive from this period, and the stories they can tell.

Notes

¹ The two other instances are probably statuettes of deities: a small nude torso from the River Leader, Scottish Borders, and a knee from Castlecary, Falkirk (Henig 2012: 154, fig. 14.2; Keppie and Arnold 1984: 31 no. 79, pl. 23).

² The date comes from the hairstyle, which is modelled on that of Trajan (AD 98–117). It does not match Trajan's specific portraiture, though, and is unlikely to show the emperor himself. See Curle 1932: 326–329, 368, figs 28, 30; Toynbee 1962: 126 no. 9, pl. 13; Toynbee 1964: 58–59; Keppie and Arnold 1984: 20–21, pl. 19; contra Russell and Manley 2015.

³ When it first came to antiquarian attention it was thought to be the head of a Medieval monk, and was only identified as Roman much later (Curle 1932: 368). For an evocative poetic response to the find, see Gillies 1990: 1–9.

⁴ In the exhibition, what are here chapters 7, 8 and 11 were displayed in sequence, moving from soldiers to the military community and then the locals. This fitted the exhibition route well but for the narrative here we have moved the Iron Age to the start and the end.

⁵ For further details and other views on Roman Scotland see: Breeze 1982; Hanson and Maxwell 1983; Maxwell 1989; Hanson 1991; Maxwell 1998; Fraser 2005; Breeze 2006a; Keppie 2015; Robertson and Keppie 2015; Reid 2023.

Picture Credits

The authors and contributors are extremely grateful to the following for the use of images in the volume:

Grant Anderson – Figure 2.1

ANGUSalive – Figure 11.8

AOC Archaeology – Figure 10.1

Archäologisches Landesmuseum Baden-Württemberg, photo: Matthias Hoffmann – Figures 10.15, 10.16a, 10.19, 10.21 and 10.22

Archäologisches Museum Frankfurt – Figures 10.3, 10.7, 10.14 and 10.17

Ian Armit – Figure 8.26

Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe. Inventory No. 2002/1528. Photo: Thomas Goldschmid – Figure 10.b

Biblioteca nazionale centrale - Roma, collocazione Ms, Rome, Italy Vit.Em.1631, folio 60v-61r. 62v-63r – Figures 3.8 and 13.9

Alan Braby – Figures 5.8, 5.10, 9.41, 9.43b and 10.18

David Breeze – Figures 4.5a, 4.5b, 4.9 and 12.7

David Breeze with additions by Bill Hanson – Figure 4.8

Cardiff University - Figure 6.17. Created by Peter Guest and Kirsty Harding using BGS data, British Geological Survey © UKRI 2023.

CFA Archaeology – Figures 5.8, 5.9, 8.24

Collection of the Duke of Northumberland, Alnwick Castle – Figure 3.11

Crown Copyright: Historic Environment Scotland – Figures 4.6, 5.11, 5.12, 5.13, 5.15, 5.16 and 6.1

Falkirk Council – Figure 9.47

Frontiers of the Roman Empire Culture 2000 project – Figure 7.9

GDKE/Rheinisches Landesmuseum Trier, Photo: Th. Zühmer – Figures 10.8 and 10.9

W.S. Hanson – Figure 13.15

Ortolf Harl (www.lupa.at) – Figure 10.5

The Haverfield Trust - Figure 3.3

Fraser Hunter – Figures 2.7, 3.17, 7.17, 11.3, 11.10 and 12.4

The Hunterian Museum, University of Glasgow – Figures 3.6, 3.15 and 8.7

Rebecca Jones – Figures 2.6, 3.9, 4.10, 13.3, 13.4, 13.5, 13.16, 13.17 and 13.18

Angus Lamb, reproduced by permission of David Breeze – Figure 3.1

LVR-Landesmuseum Bonn, photo: Jürgen Vogel – Figure 12.11

Leibniz-Zentrum für Archäologie (LEIZA)/ R. Müller – Figure 10.10

Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru / The National Library of Wales – Figure 2.4

G. Lock and I. Ralston 2024, Atlas of Hillforts of Britain and Ireland; <https://hillforts.arch.ox.ac.uk>, CC BY-SA 4.0 - Figure 2.8

Bob Marshall, © University of Aberdeen – Figures 10.2, 10.4 and 12.10

Duncan McGlynn – Figures 6.9, 6.10, 8.18a, 9.21, 9.22, 9.23 and 9.24

J.V.S. Megaw – Figure 11.17b

Museum Schloss Fechenbach Dieburg – Figures 10.2, 10.4 and 10.20

National Library of Scotland – Figure 13.10

Ratho Byres Forge – Figure 7.21

J.H. Reid, Trimontium Trust – Figures 2.9, 3.10, 4.2 and 11.5

Chris Rynn – Figures 8.27, 8.28, 8.29 and 8.30

Saalburg Roman Fort. Photo by Elke Löhnig – Figures 10.6, 10.12, and 10.13

Society of Antiquaries of Scotland – Figures 5.5, 5.6 and 7.12

The Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies – Figure 6.19

Matt F.A. Symonds – Figure 4.3

Roger Tomlin – Figures 3.4 and 8.23

The Trustees of the British Museum – Figures 2.2, 3.2, 3.5, 3.12 and 7.19b

The Trimontium Trust – Figure 7.1

West Dunbartonshire Arts and Heritage – Figure 12.9

Alan Wilkins – Figure 13.14

Phil Wilkinson – Figures 10.29 and 10.30

Courtesy of York Museums Trust: CC BY-SA 4.0 - Figure 7.3c

All other images are © National Museums Scotland.

Chapter dividers

1 Marble head, Hawkshaw, Scottish Borders

2 Neck collar, probably from Stichill, Scottish Borders

3 Artillery bolt head, Newstead, Scottish Borders

4 Tile with fingerprints, Inchtuthil, Perth & Kinross

5 Cavalry harness fitting, Inveresk, East Lothian

6 Pottery from various sources

7 Iron face mask from a parade helmet, Newstead, Scottish Borders

8 Samian with graffito DRIGISSA, Inveresk, East Lothian

9 Wooden combs, Newstead, Scottish Borders

10 Altar to Sol, Inveresk, East Lothian

11 Brooch, Pathhead, Midlothian

12 Hacksilver, Dairsie, Fife

13 Shoe with maker's stamp, Rough Castle, Falkirk

14 Head of a Maenad on a wine jug, Newstead, Scottish Borders

Appendix: Brooches, various sites

Credits and Acknowledgements: Eagle mount, Strageath, Perth & Kinross

Glossary of Latin and Unfamiliar Terms Used

acetum – vinegar

ala / *alae* – cavalry regiment

amphora / *amphorae* – large ceramic jar with a narrow neck and conical base used for transporting goods such as oil, fish sauce and wine.

aureus / *aurei* – gold coin

auxilia – auxiliary (military regiment)

beneficiarius / *beneficarii* – officer(s) serving the provincial governor

centuria / century – military regiment of 80 men

civitas – administrative district

cohors / cohort – military unit (typically 480 men)

contubernium / *contubernia* – small military unit of eight men who shared a barrack room or tent

cornu – large C-shaped horn

denarius / *denarii* – silver coin

expeditio Britannica – major Roman military expedition or campaign in Britain

intaglio – carved or engraved gemstone or glass with design sunken into surface

legatus legionis – legionary legate, commander of a legion

legio – legion (military regiment)

limes – Roman frontier (or road)

lorica segmentata – iron armour comprising overlapping strips

manica – arm guard (military armour)

mansio – official stopping place for accommodation

milliaria / millitary – military cohort of ten centuries: 800 men

mortarium / *mortaria* – heavy ceramic bowl with built-in spout and abrasive grit for grinding

omphalos – navel, centre of the earth

ostraca – broken pieces of pottery reused to carry writing

patera – shallow bronze vessel, typically for pouring libations

pelta – crescent-shaped decoration

pilum – javelin or throwing spear used by legionaries

poena post-mortem – punishment after death

praefactus castrorum – camp prefect, the third in command of a legion

praetorium – commanding officer's house (in a fort)

principia – Headquarters building (in a fort)

quingenary – military cohort of six centuries: 480 men (could also have cavalry in addition)

sestertius / *sestertii* – bronze coin

tribunus laticlavus – 'broad-striped' tribune, the second in command of a legion

trulla – handled pan

turma – subdivision of a cavalry regiment, of 30 or 32 men

vicus / *vici* – civil settlement (outside a fort)