

***Agricola* 21 and the Flavian Romanization of Britain**

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In the second century AD, the Roman writer Aelius Aristides asserted that the Roman Empire was the first that rested on consent rather than on force.¹ While this was obviously an exaggeration, it was nevertheless based upon a fundamental truth, namely that the Romans were able to control many areas by winning the consent of the ruling class. A fundamental aspect of this was Romanization, or the adoption of Roman culture by other peoples. In his *Agricola*, Tacitus himself writes of his father-in-law actively encouraging the process.² Recently, however, the trend has been to dismiss this passage as an effort to magnify the achievements of Agricola, and to see Romanization not as a state-sponsored program, but rather as a process initiated largely by the locals themselves. This paper will argue that the active Romanization depicted in *Agricola* 21 was in fact typical of the Flavian period, even if its character and Agricola's role in its development are overstated.

The passage in question, *Agricola* 21, shows Agricola encouraging Roman-style building, as well as the adoption of marks of Roman civilization such as the toga and the Latin language. Famously, however, it is the only passage in all of ancient literature that explicitly ascribes such an active role to the Romans. This has led many scholars to suppose that "if under [Roman] rule a common culture spread over an area extending from the Euphrates to the Tyne, this was not due to the conscious efforts of the government."³ Rather, the movement was a spontaneous one. David Braund comes to a similar conclusion, maintaining that it was the necessity of locals to engage in Roman law and administration that prompted their desire to integrate themselves culturally.⁴ Like Stevenson, he rejects the notion of Roman encouragement as a significant factor in the development in the provinces.

These arguments, however, ignore the significant amount of evidence that contradicts them, especially from the archaeological record. A number of towns with Roman grid layouts have been found in Britain from the late Julio-Claudian and Flavian period. Some of these were founded from scratch, others were built on the foundations of Roman forts, while still others were located on the sites of previous local settlements.⁵ These acted as instruments of Romanization in two ways. Firstly,

¹ Arist. 26.22.

² Tac. *Agr.* 21.

³ G.H. Stevenson. *Roman Provincial Administration Till the Age of the Antonines*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975), 121.

⁴ David Braund. *Ruling Roman Britain: Kings, Queens, Governors and Emperors from Julius Caesar to Agricola*, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 162; A.H.M. Jones, *A History of Rome Through the Fifth Century* Vol. 2., (New York: Walker and Company, 1966), 184.

⁵ John Wachter. *The Towns of Roman Britain*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1975, 17-35.

they served as models for a non-urbanized province such as Britain to imitate. Thus we find mentions of the presence at Colchester of such hallmarks of Roman culture as a theatre and a temple to the emperor, in addition to basic elements such as a forum.⁶ These buildings provided locals not only with physical models of construction, but also with edifices essential to Roman life. Thus Tacitus describes the locals not only building Roman buildings, but soon partaking of the activities, such as bathing, for which these had been constructed. As such, the towns provided examples not only of architecture, but also of lifestyle and culture. They also served as centers of Roman provincial government. The provinces of Britain and Gaul were divided into areas referred as *civitates*, each of which required an administrative centre.⁷ Moreover, even those towns that were not *civitas* capitals still acted as judicial centres, as it was there that the governor heard cases and enforced Roman law, itself an “education in civilized principles.”⁸ That the Romans themselves were aware of the role of towns in the process of Romanization is well illustrated by Tacitus, who claims that one of the reasons for the Roman founding of Colchester was to provide an example of Roman law for the natives to follow.⁹

R.F.J. Jones has pointed out that many of the Roman buildings of these sites were not constructed until significantly after the period of the Claudian conquest, and that only one colony (Colchester) was founded in the pre-Flavian period.¹⁰ He uses this fact to argue that the urbanization was accomplished later by already-Romanized local elites, and thus was a product of Romanization rather than an instrument of it. This conclusion, however, is unwarranted, and the temporal discrepancy between invasion and development can be readily explained by looking at Tacitus’ narrative of Britain in the late Julio-Claudian period. The province is consistently described as turbulent and troubled by revolt. Thus he describes the revolt of the Iceni ca. 50 AD, the resistance of Venutius in the 50s, and again in the late 60s, and the massive uprising under Boudicca in the early 60s.¹¹ Even the governorship of Trebellius, during which the Britons are said to have been pacified, was not free of unrest, being marked by a mutiny of the army.¹² Given these problems, it is hardly surprising we should find little evidence of civic building from this period. As Jones himself admits, it was a process that did not emerge in the first stage of conquest, but rather after the province had been consolidated.

The archaeology of British towns accords well with Tacitus’ narrative.¹³ His theory of buildings as an instrument of intentional Romanization finds support in the building of a temple to the Divine Claudius at Colchester in the early part of Nero’s reign. Religion and state were for Rome very closely linked, and acceptance of Roman religion was a key indicator of goodwill toward the Roman state. This can be seen in the measures taken by Pliny the Younger against Christians in the early second century AD: the test of their loyalty to Rome consisted of an invocation to the gods and an offer of wine and incense to the statue of the emperor.¹⁴ Indeed, if sacrifice to the Roman gods represented an acceptance of Romanism, the Imperial Cult represented an “empire-wide expression of

⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 14.31-14.32.

⁷ W.S. Hanson. *Agricola and the Conquest of the North*. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1987. 74.

⁸ Fergus Millar. *The Roman Empire and its Neighbours*, (London: Widenfield and Nicolson, 1968), 64-66; “education in civilized principles”: Sheppard Frere, *Britannia: A History of Roman Britain*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 314. From this example, it will be evident that these two functions of the town (model of Romanism and centre of Roman government) were not distinct form each other, but rather overlapped.

⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 12.32.

¹⁰ R.F.J. Jones. ‘A False Start? The Roman Urbanization of Western Europe’, *World Archaeology* 19, 1987, 49.

¹¹ *Iceni*: Tac. *Ann.* 12.31; *Venutius*: Tac. *Ann.* 12.40, *Hist.* 3.45; *Boudicca*: Tac. *Ann.* 14.34-37.

¹² Tac. *Agr.* 16; *Hist.* 1.60. During this period there may also have been remaining economic repercussions from the revolt of Boudicca; see: Wachter, 206.

¹³ The slight discrepancies between the two will be discussed below.

¹⁴ Plin. *Ep.* 10.96.

spiritual loyalty to the state.”¹⁵ The building of a temple to the Divine Claudius at the Colchester around the beginning of Nero’s reign thus appears to show an early attempt to bring Roman religious practice, with all of its implications, to Britain. This interpretation is borne out by Tacitus’ *Annals*, in which he describes the members of the Boudiccan uprising seeing the temple as the symbol of Roman rule, a “citadel of everlasting despotism.”¹⁶ In this light, the temple-building that Tacitus describes taking place under Agricola must be seen as plausible, and in keeping with Roman actions in that province.

If there is evidence of construction under Nero, it is contradicted by the archaeological finds that indicate a concerted building program only under the Flavians. The forum at Verulamium, for example, has been dated by several scholars to the early- to mid-Flavian period, as has that of Cirencester.¹⁷ Indeed there appears to have been a construction boom under the Flavians, which is further evidenced by the construction of *civitas* capitals at Dorchester, Exeter, Leicester and Wroxeter.¹⁸ Forums at both Silchester and Winchester have similarly been dated to in the Flavian period, although slightly after Agricola’s time.¹⁹ While archaeological dating is subject to error, these finds support the notion of a building program around the time of Agricola. The dating is confirmed by an inscription from Verulamium, which records the dedication of the basilica under Agricola.²⁰ This inscription also reinforces the notion of the active role of the governor in the urbanization process.²¹

This inscription, however, is also indicative of the problems with Tacitus’ narrative. Several scholars have pointed out the time frame required for the completion of such a project, and as a result have suggested that, while it may have been completed by Agricola, it was begun by his predecessor Frontinus.²² Significant building programs, however, are not recorded by Tacitus, and he seems to imply that Agricola was the first to take such an initiative. It seems, then, that Tacitus is downplaying the achievements of previous governors in favour of his father-in-law. This notion is reinforced by the parallel provided in his treatment Bolanus’ military campaigns: Tacitus notes Bolanus’ “lack of activity with regard to the enemy”, and depicts his time in Britain as generally unremarkable.²³ We learn from Statius, however, that he advanced as far as Caledonia, and that his performance of his duty was apparently noteworthy enough for Vespasian to grant him patrician rank and the position of proconsul of Asia.²⁴

From this we can see that Tacitus was not averse to downplaying others’ achievements in favour of Agricola’s, and can infer that he may well have been doing this in the case of the building programs. This, however, need not discredit the narrative as a whole. The facts of Bolanus’ campaigns in Scotland do not disprove Tacitus’ account of Agricola’s later ventures in that area, even if it renders the latter somewhat less novel and impressive.²⁵ Similarly, the fact that previous (and subsequent) governors engaged in building campaigns does not disprove similar actions on the part of

¹⁵ Martin Henig, *Religion in Roman Britain*, (London: B T Bratsford Ltd. 1984), 71.

¹⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 14.31.

¹⁷ *Forum of Verulamium*: Wachter 206, Jones, 49; *forum of Cirencester*: Jones 49.

¹⁸ Wachter, 289.

¹⁹ *Silchester*: Wachter, 260; *Winchester*: Wachter, 280.

²⁰ A.R. Burn. *The Romans in Britain: An Anthology of Inscriptions*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1969), 39-40.

²¹ Active Roman involvement in the process of town-building is also argued by Frere, who claims that they contributed loans and practical assistance; Frere, 203.

²² Hanson, 75.

²³ Tac. *Agr.* 16.

²⁴ Stat. *Silv.* 5.2

²⁵ *Agricola campaigning in Scotland*: Tac. *Agr.* 20.2. For identification of these campaigns with Scotland, see: Anthony R. Birley. *The Government of Roman Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 80.

Agricola, but merely illustrates that these were not as extraordinary as Tacitus implies. However, if the archaeological and epigraphic record reveals some inaccuracies, it has been shown that it equally confirms the overall picture painted by Tacitus, namely of an active program of Roman urbanization during the late Julio-Claudian and Flavian period.

To recapitulate, then, the towns played an essential role in the Romanizing process, a role of which the Romans themselves were aware. They promoted the urbanization of Britain as a part of the Romanization of the province, a fact supported by the archaeological evidence. If we return to *Agricola* 21, however, we find that Agricola's building program constituted only a part of his Romanizing efforts. He also offered the sons of "leading men" what amounted to a Roman education, and encouraged a Roman lifestyle, symbolized by the adoption of the Latin language.²⁶

Scholars have suggested that this linguistic adaptation was not the product of Roman initiative, but rather a measure adopted by the local elite as a way to better interact with Roman traders and governors. Braund, for example, points out that "membership in the Roman imperial elite [...] was a goal that was desirable and attainable," but for which a basic prerequisite was a knowledge of Latin.²⁷ Brunt, meanwhile, indicates that "knowledge of Latin must have made it easier for them to influence Roman officials, and to take part in trade beyond their own region." Provincials, in his view, Romanized themselves.²⁸ Seeing the advantages of adopting Roman culture would have for many been incentive enough to do so. The Romans as a rule did not replace existing elites, but rather kept them in power. Even those living outside the direct sphere of Roman rule often relied on Roman support in the maintenance of their position. Thus we find Tacitus telling us that the Marcomani and Quadi kings depended on Roman support, which took the form of both money and armed forces.²⁹ In terms of trade, it need hardly be explained the advantages that fluency in Roman language and culture would bring.

The conclusion that the process was an independent local one, however, is not justified, as there is much evidence to indicate the active role that the Romans played. Tacitus himself hints some such process during Trebellius' governorship, when he says that under him the Britons "learnt to condone many alluring vices", surely an echo of the Romanization that he later describes under Agricola.³⁰ In a similar vein, Pliny the Elder talks of Rome being "chosen by the power of the gods [...] to bring together scattered realms, to soften customs, to bring to talk together the discordant and wild tongues of so many peoples by the exchange of conversation, and to give civilization to mankind."³¹ This sounds very much like Tacitus' description of Agricola's activities, and we can infer from it that Agricola was likely not alone in pursuing such a policy. This is supported by Sherwin-White, who has shown that it was in fact a general Flavian policy to encourage education by subsidizing schools.³² Moreover, there is evidence of the presence of the Greek schoolmaster Demetrius of Tarsus in Britain at this time, surely a sign of Roman effort to provide education to the provincials.³³ In this respect again, then, the position that this process came about more or less independently of Roman agency flies in the face of the evidence of our sources. It appears that state-sponsored education of the kind described by Tacitus did in fact take place.

One element of this cultural Romanization of Britain was the adoption of the toga, and this

²⁶ Tac. *Agr.* 21.

²⁷ Braund, 162.

²⁸ P.A. Brunt. *Roman Imperial Themes*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. 268.

²⁹ Tac. *Germ.* 42.

³⁰ Tac. *Agr.* 16.

³¹ Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* 3.39.

³² A.N. Sherwin-White. *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966. 287-288.

³³ His presence is attested by his dedication of two plaques at York. Hanson, 82; Frere, 305.

is itself worthy of discussion. The toga was a sign of Roman citizenship, and the mention of its appearance among the Britons seems to represent a significant effort by the Romans to further their integration into Roman culture.³⁴ Indeed, the Flavian period witnessed a significant expansion of the citizenship, much more so than the Julio-Claudian era.³⁵ Tacitus' statement, then, is indicative of a broader theme of provincial incorporation into the citizenry under the Flavians.

The processes described in *Agricola* 21, then, were not simply idle boasts by Tacitus on behalf of his father-in-law, but rather described actual Flavian policies attested by other sources. Still, the passage has its shortcomings, which must be addressed as well. As has been shown above, the archaeological evidence indicates that Tacitus has attributed greater agency to Agricola in the building program than was actually the case. This program was not limited to Agricola, but appears to have been part of a general Flavian policy in Britain. The same can be said for his promotion of education: we have no indication that the policy was limited to him, and in any case Suetonius indicates that the initiative was Vespasian's rather than the governor's.³⁶ The extension of the citizenship was likewise an imperial policy and, while it picked up under the Flavians, it was already an issue under the Julio-Claudians. Seneca shows this in his *Apocolocyntosis* where he speaks of Claudius' desire to extend citizenship to all the peoples of the world.³⁷

Tacitus similarly downplays the role of the locals in the Romanization of the province. It has been shown above that the Romans did actively encourage the process largely in the manner described by Tacitus. This, however, need not mean, as Tacitus claims, that the local population's eagerness to adopt Roman culture was no more than a misidentification of their own slavery. It has been shown above that for many natives there were great incentives to embrace the new civilization, and the fact that the initiative came from the Romans does not indicate that the natives were being tricked into servitude.

Contrary to what *Agricola* 21 might have us believe, native culture actually continued into the Roman period. In Tacitus, the Romanized Britons show no signs of retaining their own culture, and in fact appear to have become completely and thoroughly Roman. This is a misrepresentation of the character of Romanization. While local elites did adopt many aspects of Roman culture, native customs were by no means completely done away with, and indeed continued to exist alongside, or in combination with, Roman ones. This is illustrated by the case of religion. While Rome insisted on the observance of Roman religious rituals, this by no means excluded the continuing worship of local gods. Thus we find the continuation of Celtic deities into Roman times, and while some of these became conflated with Roman gods (we find, for example, a relief showing the goddess Brigantia dressed as Minerva), others continue to exist in their own right, like the water nymph Coventina and the river god Verbeia. This continuation of native religion alongside Roman culture finds parallels elsewhere in the empire. Josephus, for example, describes the demands of Petronius upon the Jewish people: he nowhere demands that they relinquish their native religion, but requests only that they accept the imperial cult as well.³⁸ Archaeology similarly indicates a certain degree of local variation. There was an appreciable variation in town plans among the different *civitas* capitals, for example, indicating that locals were allowed a certain amount of freedom to pursue their own course.³⁹

³⁴ *Toga as a sign of Roman citizenship*: Suet. *Claud.* 15, in which it is said to be a crime for a non-citizen to wear the garment. It is important to note that these grants of citizenship would have been made to individuals who were already fairly Romanized, and as such represent a method of furthering Romanization, rather than introducing it.

³⁵ A.N. Sherwin-White. *The Roman Citizenship*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973. 258.

³⁶ Suet. *Vesp.* 17-18.

³⁷ Sen. *Apoc.* 3.

³⁸ Joseph. *BJ.* 2.10.

³⁹ Wachter, 21.

These, then, are the shortcomings of Tacitus' account of Romanization. However, while his account may be misleading in some of its details, the overall picture that it presents of an active campaign of state-sponsored Romanization in Flavian Britain is supported by other sources from the period, both archaeological and literary. The policies that Tacitus describes him instituting may have been the emperor's, rather than his own, but his institution of them should not be doubted. The result is that, while Agricola's governorship of the province may appear somewhat less spectacular as a result of this other evidence, it also appears more credible.

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