

Creating a Roman confusion in the North-east

In a previous article in *Leopard* (April 2015), I discussed some of the Roman objects found in Aberdeenshire and how these can reveal something of the relationships between the Romans and the native people of the North-east. Since the 18th century, this has been a topic of great fascination to local historians, and some of the stories they have written also reveal much about more recent ideas of identity.

In 1793, General William Roy's *Military Antiquities of the Romans in Britain* was published, including beautiful and accurate plans of the Roman sites that could be seen in the Scottish landscape. As many of these sites have now been destroyed, his plans continue to be useful for archaeologists. Other antiquarians, such as John Stuart, professor of Greek at Marischal College, wrote in 1818 that "*the historical records of the Romans, are our best guide, and almost only authority*" to interpreting remains from antiquity. To classically-educated Scottish antiquarians of the early 19th century, the history of Roman Scotland was dominated by the *Agricola*, written by Tacitus, which culminates in the battle of Mons Graupius and the defeat of the Caledonians under their leader, Calgacus. Attempts to link the literary account with archaeological evidence continue, despite General Roy's warning that "*unless a number of old Roman and Caledonian arms should, by mere accident, be dug up in the neighbourhood of those places, or that the vestiges of a camp should be discovered fronting one or other of them, we can never hope to ascertain the particular spot.*"

While Bennachie is nowadays probably the most popular suggested location of Mons Graupius, the Roman camp at Raedykes (not far from Stonehaven) was favoured by some antiquarians, including John Stuart. In 1812, he presented to the museum in



Neil Curtis

Marischal College a rusty iron loop that had been found at Raedykes a few years earlier, describing it as being "*useful for no other purpose than to contain the axle of one of [the Caledonian] war chariots*" (Stuart 1823, 300). On the other hand, an 1833 list of *Curiosities Preserved in the Museum* notes it, however, as having belonged to the other side in the battle: "*An Iron Hoop supposed to belonging [sic] to the axle of Agricola's Chariot. Found near the place where Agricola fought a desperate battle near Dunnottar (very much rusted no Wonder)*". Today, we are much less confident - it might be from an 18th-century cart!

Another acquisition by the museum in the early 19th century was "*A Roman Gladius, and sheath. Found in 1809 under deep moss on the estate of Balnagubs, in the line between the Roman camps of Rae-dykes and Drumoak. Presented in June 1818 by George Kerr Esqr, Surgeon, Aberdeen*". Explaining why it was Roman, John Stuart said that "*we must be permitted to believe that the arms of our ancestors were, in the age of Agricola, nearly the same as in modern times, viz the small shield and great iron sword or claymore; and that those of the same metal and form as the one now described, were infallibly Roman*". Written a year after the 1822 visit of George IV to Scotland, Stuart's equation of contemporary Highlanders and ancient Caledonians emphasised the primitive and historically marginal character of both. This was an attitude most clearly expressed by Sir Walter Scott, who saw Scottish

history as a series of violent tragedies, such as Culloden and Mons Graupius, that contributed little to contemporary Scotland.

After the fusion of Marischal College and King's College, in 1860, to form the modern University of Aberdeen, a new Archaeological Museum opened in Old Aberdeen with a catalogue published in 1887. Alongside a section on "*North-East Scotland*" which listed objects of many periods relating to the region's history, there was a special section on "*Romano-British Antiquities*", showing the continuing significance of the Classical past. This mentioned a second Roman sword, found at Netherley. This is an intriguing findspot as Balnagubs is next to the Red Moss of Netherley, implying that the two swords were closely associated. The faint traces of the words 'Agricola' and 'Rome' appear on this sword, probably written before it was donated to the museum. However, by the late 19th century, these swords were known not to be Roman, instead resembling swords typical of early first millennium BC Europe. Intriguingly, there is also a record of two Bronze Age swords in the "*North-East*" section of the catalogue.

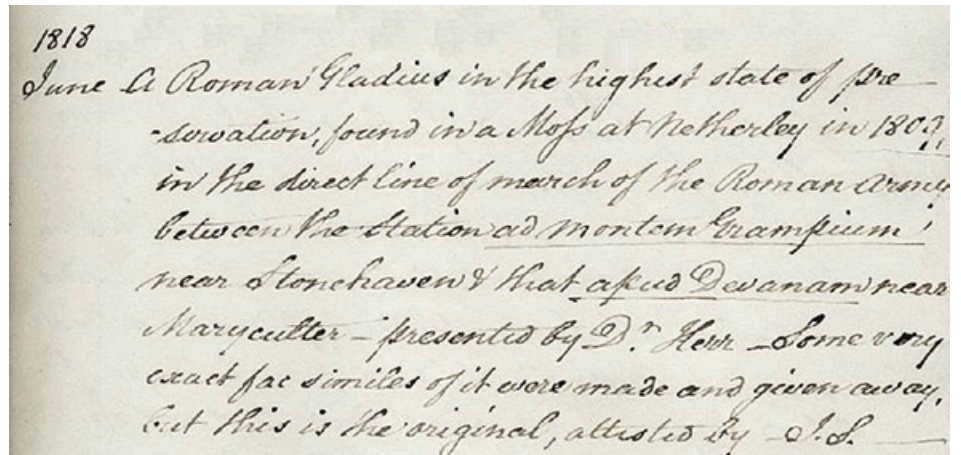
In 1846-7, Danish antiquary Jens Worsaae made a journey through England, Scotland and Ireland, during which he collected a number of items for the Royal Museum of Northern Antiquities in Copenhagen, now the National Museum of Denmark. In his memoirs, he recorded that the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland gave him a collection of objects, including a bronze sword. He knew that such swords were Bronze Age, and saw it as being "*interesting to have in our museum a small collection of Scandinavian antiquities found abroad*" which would let visitors "*hold in our hands the swords with*

Red Moss of Netherley

which they made the Danish name respected and feared. The remains of antiquity thus binds us more firmly to our native Land". As has recently been shown in the Danish television series *1864*, in the years before and after the 1848-50 Danish-Prussian war, this was high-stakes politics and Worsaae played a high-profile role in using antiquities to bolster national identity. As an astute archaeologist, when he looked at the sword he had been given he felt that it was not genuine and that he had seen similar swords "forged in the North of the Country, and he presumed the sword in question had come from that quarter". The Society therefore decided that "should they receive any donations of genuine swords similar in appearance to that presented to the Museum at Copenhagen, one of them should be reserved and forwarded in its stead", though this never happened.

It now appears that there are at least seven swords in this group (pictured, right). One, in the British Museum (Royal Armouries Collection), was published in an important corpus of Bronze Age metalwork with the comment that "it is possible that it came from the same mould in antiquity" as the earliest one collected in Aberdeen. There is another in the Aberdeen City collection, though it has no provenance, while another, in the collections of National Museums Scotland, has written on it: "This sword is probably a reproduction of a genuine one and has been acquired as such. The original may yet be discovered". The University collection includes a third sword that had been in the collection of Alexander Thomson of Banchory House (now Beannachar, part of the Camphill Community). Thomson recorded it as being a "model of a bronze sword found at Netherley (about 1815), Dr Geo. Kerr", while it was later described as a forgery and had a wooden handle added to it.

As well as archival research, the search to untangle this intriguing group of swords also involved scientific analysis of the metal by the Analytical Research Department of National Museums of Scotland and the Department of Conservation, Documentation and Science of the British Museum. This analysis concluded that "on the basis of composition alone, it would be difficult to establish that the swords were not ancient". On the other hand, two of the swords contained a little zinc (unusual in prehistoric metalwork), while there were other



William Knight's catalogue (c1810)

rarer trace elements, such as bismuth, in some of the swords. There was no doubt, however, that the earliest sword acquired by Marischal College was genuine. Looking closely at the swords, there were other oddities, particularly marks that appeared to be left by a metal file and oddly-placed rivet holes. X-rays also showed that the first sword had been hammered, removing air bubbles, whereas the other six swords had been left as cast. The final clinching evidence that six of the swords had been made in the early 19th century was that they all showed a line across the handle at exactly the same point at which the first sword was broken, while a previously un-noticed comment in the catalogue recorded that "some very exact facsimiles were made and given away, but this is the original, attested JS", presumably John Stuart.

Instead of seeing these swords as forgeries intended to deceive, this story reveals the importance of the Romans to antiquarians at the turn of the 19th century.

Rather than identifying with the native Iron Age people and the Picts, they preferred to see the Romans as their intellectual ancestors and written texts as the source of academic authority. This may explain the reference to four swords in the 1887 catalogue; by then, the Roman swords existed only as texts. In subsequent years, some of the swords were remembered as copies, but for others this was forgotten and they came to be published as genuine prehistoric swords. As the acceptance of Classical texts as an authority diminished, the antiquarian account became marginalised



and the knowledge of the copies made in the early 19th century was ignored.

The meanings of the swords have changed dramatically over 200 years. Only by combining a detailed study of their material aspects with an understanding of their textual context has it been possible to untangle the story. While this has confirmed that one of the swords was made and deposited in the later Bronze Age, it has also revealed a large group of replica leaf-shaped swords in the British Isles, with a clear motivation for their creation. These replicas were made not as fakes to deceive, but as tangible 'souvenirs' of the Romans in Scotland, encapsulating the changing attitudes of antiquarians and archaeologists to the distant past.

Neil Curtis has worked with the University of Aberdeen's Museums for 25 years, formerly based at Marischal College. He is now head of Museums at the University.