Resisting the ‘Conquerors of the Universe’: Celebrating the Rejection of Ancient Rome in Early-modern Scotland

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It has become something of a truism that members of Britain’s eighteenth-century elite were captivated by visions of ancient Rome. It is clear, certainly, that many English gentlemen of the period, enthused by their classical educations and Grand Tours, were wont to model themselves on ancient Romans, building grand houses in the Palladian, later Neo-classical style and filling them with Roman sculptures shipped from Italy at great expense. Inspired by William Camden’s iconic antiquarian tract Britannia of 1586 and the numerous updated editions which followed, many Englishmen also began to trace the Roman heritage of their own nation. A lucky few even discovered evidence of the Romans on their own estates; foundations, hypocausts, altars and mosaic pavements were dug up, shown off to visitors and sometimes removed for display indoors.¹ Such gentlemen could effectively present themselves not just as ‘new Romans’, but also as inheritors of England’s own classical tradition, secure in the knowledge that their nation had once been part of the mighty Roman Empire.

In Scotland, however, the situation was rather different, and certainly more contentious. Like their English equivalents, elite eighteenth-century Scots developed an interest in the history and culture of ancient Rome, and many also took lengthy Grand Tours to admire the impressive classical remains in Italy.² Yet Scotland’s own place within the Roman Empire remained unclear. For centuries, Scots had been celebrating the fact that they were almost unique in having repelled Roman invasion, and this victory of the Caledonians³ against the most powerful Empire that the world had ever known was worn as a badge of honour by generations of Scottish patriots. In fact, this claim was to become one of the foundation stones of the nation’s early-modern identity, defining Scots as fierce warriors not only prepared to battle for their liberty and independence, but also capable of winning that battle.
This paper will explore the scholarly (and sometimes not so scholarly) debates which emerged as the long-held belief that Caledonia had successfully rejected Rome was called into question by an eighteenth-century reverence for the classical world, and by associated attempts to establish a Roman heritage for Scotland. As we shall see, what emerged was a dispute over just how ‘Roman’ Scotland had truly been, a dispute which was to become mired in patriotism, forgery and myth. Interpretations of the nation’s history were often evidently influenced by more current concerns regarding Scotland’s right to sovereignty and the nation’s role within a new Great Britain, as well as problematic Highland/Lowland relations. At the heart of this debate lay a belief in the almost legendary strength and resilience of the Caledonians, a popular trope in a nation that often felt overshadowed, and sometimes directly threatened, by a richer, more powerful and more populous neighbour to the south.

While early modern English and French patriots could, and did, trumpet their own nation’s attempts to repel Rome, all were aware that the courageous revolts of Boudica, Caratacus and Vercingetorix were ultimately unsuccessful. The German speaking states had an anti-Roman freedom-fighter in the form of the (also ultimately unsuccessful) Hermann, and Tacitus’ Germania offered a fascinating (and not entirely flattering) picture of the lives of the region’s indigenous tribes who lived outwith the bounds of Roman imperium which could be cherry-picked for its patriotic potential. But nowhere rivalled Scotland for its historical ambiguity, a nation which claimed to have rejected Roman domination, but whose landscape was increasingly offering up evidence of Roman influence. In the end it was the myth of a brave Caledonian resistance which was to endure, thanks, I will suggest, to a growing admiration for the primitive, a movement encouraged by the internationally successful and highly controversial poems of Ossian published by James Macpherson in the 1760s. In fact, despite the period’s marked Romanist tendencies, by the end of the eighteenth century the patriotic idea of Scotland’s rejection of Rome was stronger than ever, to the point that some even welcomed the destruction of the nation’s Roman remains as symbolic of a new age of peace and progress. In exploring the early modern reception of Roman Scotland, this paper will reveal the ways in which Scots turned to ancient history during a time of political and cultural upheaval, and how they misinterpreted and manipulated it in their attempts to establish a proud national identity at a time when the status of the country and its people was becoming increasingly uncertain.
Scottish notions of the Caledonian rejection of Roman conquest can be traced back to the fourteenth century, a time when English kings were still insisting on their own suzerainty over the Scots, their claims rooted in the fantastical twelfth-century *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth. Writing around 1360 in a work now recognised as the first home-grown history of Scotland, chronicler John of Fordun tells of a defiant reply sent by the kings of the ancient Scots and Picts to Julius Caesar when the Roman general suggested that they either submit to his power or face invasion. As well as relating many (probably fictitious) battles between the inhabitants of Scotland and the Romans, Fordun was also the first to refer to the Roman frontier in Scotland, now known as the Antonine Wall, as ‘Grimisdyke’, while relating the mythical tale that the boundary was breached by Gryme, a Caledonian hero intent on freeing southern Scotland from the hands of the Romans and their allies the Britons. The patriotic potential of this supposed Scottish repulsion of a malevolent southern force hardly needs pointing out.

Such ideas were to develop more fully in the sixteenth century, during Scotland’s humanist renaissance, a time when the culture of ancient Rome became more influential, and the imagery of its rejection by Caledonia more powerful. The notoriously fabulous *Historia Gentis Scotorum* of Hector Boece, published in Paris in 1527 and received with acclaim throughout Europe, makes many references to Caledonian victories against the Romans. While he employed the evidence contained in the recently rediscovered *Agricola* of Tacitus, which features accounts of a late first-century Roman invasion and defeat of the Caledonians at the famous battle of Mons Graupius, Boece cunningly added his own sequel, in which vanquished chieftain Calgacus (referred to here by the archaicised Scots name ‘Galdus’) reclaims his losses and regains the region’s independence. Also included are descriptions of numerous later conflicts between Caledonia and Rome in which, hardly surprisingly, the former tends to come out on top.

Soon after, neo-Latinist George Buchanan, whose work was also well-known and much admired internationally, explored the theme in both historical and poetic writings. Buchanan certainly expressed some ambivalence regarding the influence of Rome on Scotland, celebrating the austere virtue of Caledonia’s ancient tribes while also desiring the dumping of ancient Scotland’s “rusticity and barbarism” in favour of a new Latin age. His Scottish history, entitled *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* and published just after his death in 1582, reveals a bias towards Scotland’s indigenous peoples, and although Buchanan uses Tacitus as
a source, he repeats Boece’s bogus claim that Agricola’s successes were quickly overthrown by the vengeful Caledonians. Buchanan’s most extensive poetic reference to his nation’s rejection of Rome appears in his 1558 epithalamium honouring Mary Stuart’s marriage to Francis of Valois. The poem highlights Scotland’s long history of unbreached liberty, and talks of the nation as a place where ‘Roman conquest’s march stood still’ (hic est victoria fixit/ Praecipitem Romana gradum), also noting that this was a feat which other ancient nations including Parthia, Egypt and Germany had notably failed to achieve. It continues with imagery of Caledonian impregnability, again highlighting Scotland’s unique success in rejecting Rome:

Solaque gens mundi est, cum qua non culmine montis,
Non rapidi ripis ammis, non objice silvae,
Non vasti spatiis campi Romana potestas,
Sed muris fossaque qui confinia regni
Munivit: gentesque alias cum pelleret armis
Sedibus, aut victas vilem servaret in usum
Serviti, hic contenta suos defendere fines
Roma securigeris praetendit moenia Scotis:

(This is the only country against which Rome fortified its boundaries, not by high mountains,
Not by the banks of a swift flowing river, nor by the thrusting forth of a forest, not by the extent of a desert,
But by walls and trenches. When it drove other peoples by force of arms from the homes of their ancestors,
Or reduced them to vile slavery,
Here Rome was satisfied to defend its frontiers, and put up walls to keep out the axe-wielding Scots.)

An intriguing conflict is generated in such an erudite Latin portrayal of the complete rejection of Roman culture. Indeed, the paradox of a world-class Latinist emerging from a nation which proudly (and repeatedly) claimed to have never succumbed to Roman conquest was apparently recognised by French scholar Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540-1609), whose epitaph for Buchanan contains the oft-quoted lines:
Imperii fuerat Romani Scotia limes
Romani eloquii Scotia finis erit.

(Scotland formed the frontier of the Roman Empire
Scotland will be the limit of Roman eloquence.)

Despite increasing doubts as to its accuracy, Buchanan’s *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* was to endure into the eighteenth century as one of the most popular histories of Scotland, and was one of the few modern texts in the Scottish school curriculum at that time. That his poem for Mary Stuart, specifically the section which celebrated Caledonian liberty, was also to remain well-known and admired for generations is demonstrated in an anonymous essay entitled ‘Additional Remarks on the Poetry of Buchanan’ printed in Edinburgh periodical *The Bee* on 16 November 1791: ‘Of this passage, which has been often quoted, one need only say that it has hardly ever been excelled, even by our author himself’.

Writing the dedication (to King Charles II) of his *Institutions of the Laws of Scotland* on the eve of the long eighteenth century, James Dalrymple, 1st Viscount of Stair, powerfully conveyed the importance of Caledonia’s independence for national self-esteem, subtly conflating resistance to the ancient empire with rejection of the modern church of Rome:

> We do not pretend to be amongst the great and rich kingdoms of the earth, yet we know not who can claim preference in antiquity and integrity, being of one blood and lineage without any mixture of any other people, and have so continued above 2000 years... And that You and Your Subjects of Scotland have been least under the Yoak of Rome, in your Sacred or Civil Interest, their arms could never subdue You, but they turned on the Defensive; and to exclude Your Valour, two of their most famous Emperors, Severus and Hadrian, were at an Incredible Coast [sic] to Build two Walls, from Sea to Sea...14

Elsewhere, however, interest in identifying and charting evidence of Roman involvement in Scotland was growing. As early as the 1580s, cartographer Timothy Pont was making maps and notes which included details on Roman sites, also recording the line of the Antonine Wall which runs across the Forth/Clyde isthmus. During the seventeenth century Christopher Irvine
(c.1629-1693), Charles II’s Historiographer Royal in Scotland, wrote detailed (now lost) observations on this Roman frontier, also recording the numerous forts and inscriptions found along its route.15

It was in the late seventeenth century, as elite British minds fell increasingly under the spell of ancient Rome, that the existing historiography was first challenged by suggestions that Scotland had in fact been a ‘civilised’ Roman province.16 By the early 1680s, renowned virtuoso Robert Sibbald was investigating the exploits of Agricola in Scotland and attempting to relate the events described in Tacitus’ text to the modern Scottish landscape.17 Much of his work at this time was in preparation for a *Scottish Atlas*, an ambitious project commissioned after his appointment as Scottish Geographer Royal in 1682 which was never to make it to the press, stymied by changing monarchs and lack of funding.18 Various antiquarian tracts, often including material gathered for the aborted *Atlas*, were finally published in the early eighteenth century, including the *Historical Inquiries, Concerning the Roman Monuments and Antiquities in the North-part of Britain called Scotland* of 1707, the *Conjectures Concerning the Roman Ports, Colonies, and Forts, in the Firths* of 1711 and a Latin commentary on the Scottish expeditions of Agricola published the same year. Although his early manuscripts show the influence of, and indeed openly cite Fordun,Boece and Buchanan, Sibbald’s own research, which included both fieldwork and correspondence with a network of gentlemen, scholars and clerics across the country, later led him to formulate a new and radical representation of ancient Scotland, one which flew in the face of previous claims of Caledonian liberty:

By all which is made clear, that the Romans stayed long in the Country: They did introduce Order and Civility where ever they came, and by the Arts and Policy they taught our Ancestors, they tamed their Fierceness, and brought them to affect a civil Life: The Order they established in their Colonies and Garrisons, and Ports, gave rise to the buildings of our best Towns.19

As an admirer of ancient Rome, its civility and its culture, Sibbald was attempting to establish a classical heritage for his own country; indeed, whilst previous commentators had heralded Scotland’s rejection of Roman *imperium*, Sibbald regarded the identification of a Roman legacy as something to be celebrated. An ardent patriot intent on improving the international status of Scotland, dedicating much of his work to promoting learning and ‘advancing
the wealth of the Kingdome’, Sibbald saw prestige not in a rejection of Rome, but rather in the evidence that Scotland, or more specifically the Lowlands, had once been a Roman province. An accomplished Latinist, he even believed, rather ambitiously, that aspects of Scotland’s language were directly descended from this period of Roman rule, writing of (unspecified) words still in use which were ‘introduced by the Romans...when they were here’.21

The subject attracted attention south of the border too. In 1720 English antiquarian William Stukeley, recently appointed secretary of the Society of Antiquaries in London, published an essay entitled An Account of a Roman Temple and other Antiquities near Graham's Dike in Scotland. Like Sibbald, Stukeley held the Romans in great esteem, viewing them as bringers of civilisation and stability. Although largely focused on the enigmatic, probably Roman domed structure then located in central Scotland, known commonly as Arthur’s O’on, his tract also contains a detailed description of the Roman landscape which surrounded it. Apparently unaware of Sibbald’s antiquarian writings, and never having ventured north of Hadrian’s Wall, Stukeley proposed a southern Scotland dotted with symbols of Roman power, a place ‘throng’d with the Illustrious Romans, who have left there, so many noble Trophies of their Footsteps to eternize their Memory, and for future Ages to admire’.22

As a widespread reverence for ancient Rome began to pervade Scotland, so interpretations of the nation’s ancient past were moving in new, more classical directions; but those attached to the tradition of a Scotland beyond the bounds of Roman dominion were not to be outdone. The change in status brought about by the Union of 1707 inevitably cast up memories of the nation’s ancient liberty, and political rhetoric turned to the past in search of rousing examples of Scottish independence, with the English implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) being compared yet again to invaders of old. In 1703 James Hodges, a pamphleteer resistant to Scotland’s proposed surrendering of its sovereignty in a treaty of Union, made reference to the nation’s ancient battle for independence against the Romans, the Saxons, the Danes and the Normans in his Rights and Interests of the Two British Monarchies Inquir’d Into, and Clear’d, also noting the far less impressive record of England when it came to repelling foreign invasion. A pamphlet attributed to the anti-Unionist Reverend James Clark, poetically entitled Scotland’s Speech to her Sons and printed in 1706, even bemoaned that the devious English were about to succeed where the Romans had ultimately failed, invoking Scaliger while blaming Scottish apathy or greed for the impending loss of sovereignty:
You may secure me against such Intollerable Incroachments and Injuries, and have spoiled the Glory of my INDEPENDENT SOVEREIGNTY in Times past. Roman Arms could never do what English Craft and Scots Silliness have done, to call it worse:

*Imperii fuerat Romani Scotia Limes*
Scotland of Old Rome’s Arms did Bound
None but Scots-men can Scotland Wound.\(^2^3\)

Even after the Union was enacted, as Scotland and England merged into a new Great Britain, Scottish antiquarians were intent on portraying their homeland as a fierce defender of her independence. Often displaying Jacobite tendencies to varying degrees, their works were regularly tinged with a sense of nostalgia for a valiant Scotland now lost. Publishing his *Martial Atchievements of the Scots Nation* in 1711, confirmed Jacobite Patrick Abercromby was surely one of the last scholars to lift wholesale from the increasingly mistrusted histories of Hector Boece. Portraying modern Scots as direct descendants of the Caledonians faced by the Romans, he made much of their courage, telling how they had

so often withstood, and so bravely repel’d the Roman Attacks; against whom two Emperors came over and fought in person, whom even *Julius Agricola* could not beat out of the Island, and who in fine, after an almost continu’d struggle of very nigh 200 years, from the reign of *Claudius* to that of *Severus*, had compel’d the Conquerors of the Universe to set Boundaries to their Ambition.\(^2^4\)

Surely the most fiercely patriotic work of this period relating to Roman Scotland is the *Itinerarium Septentrionale*, a book whose author was dedicated to locating and describing the remains of Rome in Scotland, but also keen to prove that Roman involvement there had been transient, and ultimately unsuccessful. With the support of dedicated Romanist Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, ambitious young antiquarian Alexander Gordon set off on an ‘antiquary peregrination’\(^2^5\) in 1723, a copy of Sibbald’s *Historical Inquiries* under his arm: ‘this book is absolutely necesary for my designes seeing it directs me to 50 or 60 places which I knew nothing about’.\(^2^6\) Once his tour was complete,
however, his opinion of Sibbald’s work had changed. ‘I was surprized that he places whole Countries, Roman Garrisons, Colonies and Forts in that Country, which I have very good reason to believe were never there’ he stated in his finished work, published in 1726. 27 Although Gordon was full of praise for the achievements of the ‘great Romans’ elsewhere in their empire, the title of his fourteenth chapter demonstrates his feelings regarding Roman Scotland in particular: ‘An Essay from the foregoing History, to shew how far that Assertion of the Scottish Nation is just, That they were never conquered by the Romans’. 28 A fine example of what Iain Gordon Brown has termed ‘political antiquarianism and patriotic archaeology’, 29 Gordon’s intention was to present Scotland not as a stable and settled Roman province, but rather a war zone, its Roman remains evidence not of civilisation, but of ongoing failed attempts to subdue an indomitable people.

The Itinerarium also gives interesting insight into English attitudes towards Scotland’s claims of victory over Rome. Although he named no names, Gordon strongly denounced the suggestion made by English antiquarians that Scotland remained unconquered not due to its invincible inhabitants, but rather because it was simply not worth the trouble. 30 This was certainly an opinion expressed by John Horsley, raised in Newcastle and educated at Edinburgh University, whose posthumously published Britannia Romana of 1732 was widely seen as improving on the sometimes questionable scholarship of the Itinerarium. Indeed, Horsley appears to attribute the lack of Roman involvement in northern Scotland more to apathy than failure: ‘The Romans seem to have been indifferent about keeping possession of any part of this island beyond the walls’; ‘What could move them to march so far to conquer such a country?’ he asked, adding that this was a question which had often been proposed. 31 A furious Gordon, who had been made aware of Horsley’s impending publication and bitterly questioned its originality with the suggestion that ‘it was easy for other people to sail to America after Columbus had found it’, 32 had already responded with a hastily compiled Additions and Corrections to his Itinerarium. If anything even more fiercely patriotic than the original book, this new supplement quoted the words placed in the mouth of defiant Caledonian chief Calgacus by Tacitus, referring to the Romans as ‘Raptores Orbis, The Plunderers of the World’, also explicitly comparing them to the modern-day pirates faced by the work’s dedicatee, Scottish naval hero James Macrae. 33

Meanwhile, similarly bold claims for ancient Caledonia were appearing in other fields, with Scottish poets in particular making regular use of their
nation’s proud heritage of resistance. If Gordon had used his investigations into the material and literary evidence of Rome in Scotland to prove that the nation had never really been properly Roman at all, then the work of Allan Ramsay, the most famous Scottish poet of the early eighteenth century, renders this paradox even more distinct. The humble status of Ramsay’s family denied him a classical education, with the poet himself later lamenting his own ignorance of Latin; instead he was raised on folk tales and traditional ballads, an upbringing which inspired him to become a collector of Scots vernacular texts. The success of his early work led to a rapid rise in status, allowing Ramsay entry into Edinburgh’s intellectual circles, and in 1712 he helped to found the Easy Club, an association of gentlemen with distinct Jacobite and anti-Unionist tendencies. In this light, his traditional portrayal of Scotland’s ancient history is perhaps predictable:

Their Great Forefathers sought the Field,
Not doubting of their Arm’s Success;
They made insulting foes to yield,
Who, lab’ring to be great, grew less,
The Roman Eagle, towring to the skies,
Pierc’d by their ARROWS, reeling sinks and dies.35

Numerous similar celebrations of Caledonia’s victory against Rome can be found throughout Ramsay’s work. His attitude towards Rome in general, however, was more complex. Later tuition in Latin allowed Ramsay to engage with the literature of the ancients, and his poetry is also filled with references to the grandeur and importance of ancient Rome. The Preface to his 1721 collected works draws attention to the inspiration of Horace, while one of Ramsay’s ‘imitations’ of the Roman poet sets up what has been described as ‘a complex set of images which brings Edinburgh and Rome into conjuncion’, and features the suggestion that the cliffs of the Pentland Hills were ‘As high as any Roman wa’”(As high as any Roman wall).36

For such men, there was apparently no contradiction in professing a strong admiration for Rome whilst expressing pride that your own nation had resolutely rejected it centuries before. The popularity of Ramsay’s work, and its appearance in best-selling volumes and newspapers, suggests that its reach would have been far wider than even the most well-read antiquarian tomes. For more evidence of just how pervasive the idea of Scotland’s repulsions of Rome
was at this time, and how keen eighteenth-century Scots were to remind themselves of it even when it was hardly necessary, look no further than page 9508 of Edinburgh newspaper The Caledonian Mercury of 18 October 1731, in which one brief report on the history and geography of Corsica, refers to the ‘all conquering (Scotland excepted) Romans’.

That some Scots expressed ambivalence on the subject, and were even uncomfortable with celebrations of Scotland’s rejection of Rome, is demonstrated by the writings of the aforementioned Sir John Clerk. A staunch Unionist, Clerk was also something of a Romanist obsessive, filling his house at Penicuik with Roman antiquities sourced both at home and abroad, modelling its extensive parklands on the classical Italian campagna, and claiming to have read Horace’s Ars Poetica at least fifty times. Generous in his patronage of Alexander Gordon, and also a close friend of Allan Ramsay, Clerk at times shared their admiration for the Caledonians, in public at least. In a paper delivered to the Edinburgh Philosophical Society in 1739 inspired by a tour of Hadrian’s Wall, for example, he described the Roman frontier as symbolic of Scotland’s ancient fight for independence. In private, however, he was more circumspect. In a letter to English antiquarian Roger Gale in 1726, he stated it was a ‘reproach to a nation’ to have resisted Rome, and writing in 1739 after that same visit to Hadrian’s Wall, he stated that ‘The Romans indeed Walled out humanity from us, but ‘tis certain they thought the Caledonians a very formidable people when they at so much labour and cost built this Wall as before they had made a Vallum between Forth and Clyde’.

The reason for his reticence, which at times verges on disappointment at Scotland’s lack of a convincing Roman heritage, can be found in his manuscript History of the Union Between England and Scotland, composed in the later 1720s but left unpublished on Clerk’s death in 1755: ‘But the descendants of those Caledonians today should take care not to boast of their resistance too much, for to be proud of their refusal of Roman rule means admitting that one’s ancestors were barbarians with no claim to civilization whatever.’

Sir John was certainly not alone in his preference for Roman civility over what was perceived to be Caledonian savagery, and despite the power of patriotic tradition, attempts to locate a classical legacy for Scotland persisted. William Maitland wrote to Clerk in 1742 making enquiries as to which elements of Highland dress and weaponry he thought might be directly descended from Roman models. Although Clerk’s response is now lost, he seems to have been impressed by Maitland, later declaring him a ‘second Camden’ to Roger Gale.
Finally, in 1757, Maitland’s antiquarian research was published in his *History and Antiquities of Scotland*, in which he not only claimed that the kilt was descended from the Roman toga and the Highlander’s bonnet from the Roman *pileus*, but that the Gaelic still widely spoken in the north of Scotland contained many Latin words and phrases which had survived from a period of Roman occupation.  

Although such apologists for Roman invasion may have been in a minority, a source emerged at the end of the 1740s which seemed to justify their position. Apparently unearthed in a Copenhagen library by English expatriate naval instructor and aspiring antiquarian Charles Bertram, a medieval manuscript containing details on the geography of Roman Britain showed that Scotland had not only been almost completely conquered, with a pair of altars somewhere on the coast near modern-day Cromarty marking the limit of Roman control, but also split into two provinces called *Valentia* and *Vespasiana*. In 1747 Bertram made contact with William Stukeley, and in the correspondence which followed Bertram focused in particular on the new information this rediscovered source contained regarding Scotland.  

Stukeley enthusiastically welcomed these revelations, later updating his own copy of his 1720 essay on Roman Scotland with numerous hand-written corrections as a result.  

Attributed by Stukeley to fourteenth-century monk Richard of Cirencester, and believed to be based on a lost memoir penned by Agricola himself, this source, commonly known as the *De Situ Britanniae*, was to reach a wider audience in 1757, when Stukeley published an English abridgement, and Bertram released the original Latin alongside texts by Nennius and Gildas. That the manuscript was an elaborate, if not particularly accomplished hoax cobbled together by Bertram himself was not to emerge for almost a century, when more careful analysis of the Latin revealed its numerous flaws and anachronisms. By then, its influence on the historiography of Roman Britain was widespread.  

The *De Situ Britanniae* was to inspire a generation of Scottish antiquarians to search out the remains of Rome in Scotland, most notably a distinct band of military men involved in the suppression of the Highlands which followed the unsuccessful Jacobite revolts of 1715 and 1745. That this (often brutal) process of pacification was apparently based on Roman models has been previously noted in modern scholarship.  

That it was seen to compare to, or even surpass, Roman achievements, was made explicit at the time; the *Britannia* of 1789 notes that ‘troops employed in making these roads left
engraved on the rocks the names of the regiment each part belonged to after the manner of the Romans, and General George Wade himself placed an inscription on the bridge he built over the Tay at Aberfeldy which noted its position 250 miles beyond the limits of the Roman empire. Both military Hanoverians of an antiquarian bent, Generals Robert Melville and William Roy spent their leisure hours locating and recording the camps of the Romans in Perthshire and Aberdeenshire, poring over Tacitus and the De Situ Britanniae, and no doubt imagining themselves as following in the footsteps of their beloved Agricola. And if such representatives of the Hanoverian regime were effectively branding themselves as ‘new Romans’, then it is perhaps no surprise that the Highlanders, already subject to centuries of disdain and prejudice from Lowland Scots, were often represented by them as bellicose savages little changed from the barbarians faced by the Romans over 1500 years previously.

The work of these Romanist antiquarians combined with the spurious evidence of the De Situ Britanniae effectively moved the focus of Roman Scotland northwards, conflating Highlanders with the ancient Caledonians and representatives of the Hanoverian regime with the civilising Romans, also calling in to question yet again the long-held belief in the nation’s much-vaunted ancient liberty. That Highlanders were as unhappy in accepting such developments in their historiography as they were to submit to attempts by Lowland elites to eradicate their culture is demonstrated in the emergence of yet another historically unreliable source, the poems of Ossian. Supposedly rediscovered and translated from the original Gaelic by Highlander James Macpherson in the early 1760s, this cycle of epic poems attributed to a third-century bard recast the Caledonians not as barbarians, but rather as cultured, courtly heroes with a tradition of oral poetry to match that of the classical world. Some readers, most famously Samuel Johnson, were highly sceptical of the poems’ authenticity, declaring them a fake authored by Macpherson himself. Despite this, the poems were a phenomenal success, their nostalgic tales of ‘golden age’ heroes battling on windswept mountainsides chiming perfectly with emerging fashions for Romantic primitivism and the sublime. Hugh Blair, professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at Edinburgh University, declared them equal to, if not better than, the poems of Virgil and Homer. Macpherson and his supporters were also keen to present the poems as an important historical source, with Robert Henry noting in his History of Great Britain of 1771 that ‘the poems of that venerable bard are not only valuable for their potential beauties, but also for the light that they throw on the history and antiquities of our
country’. Napoleon was a huge fan, allegedly carrying his own copy of *Ossian* with him on his campaigns, and Thomas Jefferson adored them. The poems of Ossian became a global sensation, altering the way that Scotland was represented and perceived at home and abroad in the process. Although often dismissed as a fraud, recent scholarship has been kinder to Macpherson, uncovering links between the poems and popular Highland ballads, and highlighting his role in the preservation of a fast-disappearing Highland culture; their content relating to the Roman interventions in Scotland, however, which features tales of glorious Caledonian victories, seem largely rooted in Macpherson’s own interpretation of various texts, both classical (Tacitus and Dio) and sixteenth-century Scottish (Boece and Buchanan).

References to the Romans in the poems of Ossian are certainly oblique. Notes added by Macpherson explain that the ‘kings of the world’ were the emperors of Rome, that the ‘Caracul’ mentioned in the poem *Comala* must be Caracalla, son of emperor Septimius Severus, while the ‘Caros’ in *The War of Caros* was identified as late third-century usurper Carausius, the poem relating to a battle with the Caledonians which took place as Carausius was repairing ‘Agricola’s Wall’. As befitting such sagas of Caledonian bravery, the Romans are presented as a fearful and feeble enemy, constantly on the back foot, or retreating to hide behind a ‘gathered heap’, which Macpherson helpfully glossed as the Roman wall in Scotland. Macpherson self-consciously attempted to preempt criticism of the appearance of the Romans in the poems in a *Dissertation Concerning the Antiquity etc. of the Poems of Ossian the Son of Fingal*, which first appeared in the 1762 edition of *Fingal*:

Some people might imagine, that the allusions to the Roman history might have been industriously inserted into the poems, to give them the appearance of antiquity. This fraud must then have been committed at least three ages ago, as the passages in which the allusions are made, are alluded to often in the compositions of those times.

In fact, this comment seems to reveal the very intentions of an increasingly defensive Macpherson; thus a revolutionary new representation of the Caledonians was fitted into the context of a long-standing historiographical tradition and placed securely in the third century C.E., pulling Ossian out of the world of myth and into the realms of history. This endeavour was not entirely successful. Gibbon, although generally convinced by the authenticity of the
poems, was somewhat confused by Ossian’s reference to ‘Caracul’, noting that the unofficial nickname Caracalla was not generally used to refer to the emperor Antoninus until after his death, long after his dealings with the Caledonians, and was seldom employed by the most ancient historians. More recently it has become clear that Carausius’ invasion of Scotland is nothing more than a fiction concocted by Geoffrey of Monmouth, and later repeated by Fordun and Boece.

Such doubts notwithstanding, new directions in Scottish historiography can be detected in the decades following the publication of Ossian, including a new sense of confidence in the nobility of the indigenous tribes combined with an anti-Roman bias even stronger than what had come before. The Ossianic visions of ancient Scottish civility had effectively erased that previous image of the Caledonians as barbarians, and presented them anew as gallant, dignified heroes. Finally, genteel eighteenth-century Scots could relate to their supposed ancestors without blushing at their brutality, and Sir John Clerk’s claim that boasting of the rejection of Rome meant admitting to a barbaric past seemed no longer relevant.

In the 1720s, proud Scots like Alexander Gordon and Allan Ramsay had harnessed the patriotic potential of Scottish rejection of invasion while still avowing an admiration for Rome and its culture. Half a century later, however, at least one Scot demonstrated a much more negative view of the Romans in his portrayal of ancient Scottish liberty. Serialised in the *Edinburgh Magazine and Review* in 1774-5 and published as a book in 1777, local church minister William Nimmo’s *General History of Stirlingshire* expressed an aggressive disdain for Rome and its imperial ambitions. Nimmo’s descriptions of supposedly Agricolan sites in his locality regularly cite Alexander Gordon, but his dismissal of the Roman remains would surely have made even this staunchly patriotic predecessor balk:

In fine, we are tempted to think, that those works we have been surveying were never intended for any great or lasting use. Notwithstanding all the parade which Tacitus makes, when he speaks of his father-in-law’s transactions, we cannot see such feeble barriers could secure the Roman conquests...What effect could a few fortifications of earth, as most of those were...have to repel so brave a people as the ancient Caledonians appear to have been.
Regarding the Roman Wall which also runs through the shire, Nimmo describes it in some detail, also citing the mention of it in Ossianic poetry as a gathered heap, before roundly denouncing its effectiveness as a frontier. Again using the word ‘feeble’, Nimmo saw the Roman belief that such ‘castles of mud, and walls of turf’ could keep out the ‘naturally brave’ Caledonians as nothing short of insane vanity. Indeed, he proposed, while they were quick to denigrate others as barbarians, the only thing which apparently separated the Romans from the Caledonians was their skill in conquest and their subsequent success in ‘oppression and injustice’. Roman roads provoked a similar emotion in the author, who reflects on them as ‘the remains of an all-grasping, rapacious nation, who...were animated by a malicious passion to pillage and enslave the rest of mankind’. Such was Nimmo’s distaste for all things Roman that he was happy to see the material remains of Roman Scotland disappear under the plough of agricultural progress, preferring ‘green fields and plentiful harvests, the produce of peace and industry’ to “those memorials of ambition and war”. This sentiment is similar to that displayed in the 1798 Traveller’s Guide or, a Topographical Description of Scotland, in which the anonymous author also celebrates the loss of the Antonine Wall to the plough, stating that ‘here we see the Caledonian trampling upon the ruins of Roman ambition, and unfettered commerce occupying the seat of imperious usurpation’. The final decades of the eighteenth century witnessed fervent searches for the location of Mons Graupius, the pivotal battle between the Romans and Caledonians described by Tacitus towards the end of the Agricola. With these searches often carried out by ministers or landowners, the site was generally found to have occurred, rather conveniently, in the searcher’s own parish or on his own estate. Although the battle was a resounding victory for the Romans, it is clear that many Scots still associated it with ideas of Caledonian bravery, as exemplified by the writings of David Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan. Although fascinated by Rome and its material remains in Scotland, contributing an essay on Agricolan camps to the 1789 edition of Camden’s Britannia, a letter by Buchan published in the Bibliotheca Topographica in 1786 reveals his clear affiliation with the Caledonians, and exhibits no small amounts of romantic Ossianic whimsy:

I own...that when I shall again survey the hill where the brave Galgacus [sic] fought, I shall be apt to throw off my shoes, and say the ground on which I stand is consecrated to the fervour of our patriotism; I shall
hear the harangues of Galgacus and of Agricola sounding in my ears with the eloquence of Tacitus; and, animated with the imaginary clashing of hostile shields, I shall exclaim, My ancestors were defeated, but not subdued.65

Buchan was just one example of a phenomenon which was to become known by the end of the century as ‘Agricolamania’, an obsession with locating the events of Tacitus’ text within the Scottish landscape which resulted in many fantastical conjectures. Such a fanciful attitude towards the ancient past was ultimately lampooned in Sir Walter Scott’s novel The Antiquary, published in 1816 but set two decades previously. In one of the novel’s more comic moments, its protagonist, a pedantic antiquarian named Jonathan Oldbuck, attempts to convince a young acquaintance to compose an epic patriotic poem describing the battle between Agricola and the Caledonians. ‘The Caldedoniad; or Invasion Repelled – Let that be the title,’ announces the antiquary, at which point the young man points out that the Roman invasion had not in fact been repelled. ‘No; but you are a poet – free of the corporation, and as little bound down to truth or probability as Virgil himself’, replies Oldbuck. ‘You may defeat the Romans in spite of Tacitus’.66

Outside the realms of antiquarianism, the belief in Scotland’s rejection of Rome apparently remained as strong as ever, its power only bolstered by the passion for Ossian. Many of the growing number of tourists travelling north of the border were brought there by their love of the poems, with canny locals often associating local features such as caves or mountains with Ossianic heroes or battles in a bid to draw wealthy visitors.67 Ossian’s Hall, a Perthshire folly constructed by the Duke of Atholl in which a portrait of the bard could be rolled back by a hidden mechanism to reveal a mirrored room and view of a cascade beyond, became a popular destination. Further south, Penicuik House, once home to arch-Romanist Sir John Clerk and his extensive collection of Roman artefacts, became better-known for its own Ossian’s Hall, a grand saloon with ceiling featuring vignettes from the poems painted by Alexander Runciman in 1772. Ossian’s influence can be felt in the nation’s poetry too: Thomas Mercer’s poem Arthur’s Seat, published in his 1774, combined the history of George Buchanan with the language of Ossian when it talks of the Antonine Wall as a ‘place where gathered heap around/ Marks of Roman power the bound’.68 The work of Allan Ramsay was to prove a strong influence on Robert Fergusson (1750-1774), an accomplished classicist (his work displays}
influences of Juvenal, Horace and Virgil amongst others)\textsuperscript{69} with a similar interest in vernacular Scots poetry whose work also includes numerous references to Scotland’s rejection of Rome. His Elegy, On the Death of Scots Music, for example, laments the loss of old traditions in the face of foreign influence, and recalls a time when Scots were more willing to fight to preserve their noble heritage:

\begin{shades}
\begin{verse}
O Scotland! That cou’d yence afford
To bang the pith of Roman sword,
Winna your sons, wi’ joint accord,
To battle speed,
And fight till Music be restor’d,
Which now lies dead?\textsuperscript{70}
\end{verse}
\end{shades}

Also showing influences of Ramsay, Robert Burns wrote in his 1789 ballad Caledonia of how the nation, personified as a woman, took on ‘a flight of bold eagles from Adria’s strand’ with predictable results: ‘She took to her hills, and her arrows let fly/ The daring invaders they fled or the died’. Even schoolboys learnt of Caledonian bravery; the period’s most popular classical civilisation textbook, Roman Antiquities by Edinburgh headmaster Alexander Adam (published in 1791, reissued in numerous editions during the following decades in Scotland, England and the United States, also translated into German, French and Italian) concludes its exhaustive 577-page description of Roman grandeur and imperial might with a final note, almost of amazement: ‘But what is remarkable, the whole force of the empire, although exerted to the utmost under Severus, one of its most warlike princes, could not totally subdue the inconsiderable nation of the Caledonians, whose invincible ferocity in defence of freedom, at last obliged that Emperor, after granting them peace, to spend near two years in building, with incredible labour, a wall of solid stone...to repress their inroads’.\textsuperscript{71}

Inspired by the spurious De Situ Britanniae, and no doubt influenced by his own support for the emerging British Empire, George Chalmers was perhaps the last antiquarian of this period to propose an ancient Scotland almost completely conquered by Rome.\textsuperscript{72} In the first volume of his monumental Caledonia, he writes of a recently-discovered Roman bath at Burghead in his native Moray, and proposes that, by the middle of the second century, ‘every inhabitant of North-Britain, who resided along the east coast, from the Tweed
to the Murray Firth, might have claimed...every privilege, which particularly belonged to a Roman citizen'.

This vision of a classical Caledonia seemed to have little impact on the general populous, however. By the time Sir Walter Scott organised his famous tartan-swathed Edinburgh welcome for George IV in 1822, the Highlands, once denigrated as barren and savage, had become a synecdoche for a new noble Scotland, a culturally distinct but peacefully integrated part of a greater Britain, and ideas of a Roman heritage for the nation had all but vanished.

Like all fashions, the taste for Ossian ultimately faded, and interest in the Scotland’s ancient history waned. In the search for patriotic history, nineteenth-century Scots turned away from the Caledonians, and looked instead to more stable, reliable episodes of victory over an invading enemy, with William Wallace and Robert the Bruce becoming particular favourites in both written histories and public monuments. But they also embraced defeat; with the Jacobite threat now nothing but a distant memory, its imagery became part of nineteenth-century Scots’ increasingly romanticised view of their own past and present. Perhaps the period of Roman Scotland had proved just too contentious, too vague and ambiguous; after all, as David Lowenthal notes, ‘we need a stable past to validate tradition, to confirm our own identity, and to make sense of the present. How can we rely on a past that is fluid and alterable?’

Twenty-first-century historians are more pragmatic about ancient Scotland’s relations with Rome. Modern archaeology has revealed links between the Iron Age inhabitants of southern Scotland and the Romans, even during periods when Roman involvement in the region was limited. Roman coin hoards and artefacts discovered in tribal settlements throughout Scotland suggest that the Caledonians were willing to accept payment from the Romans in exchange for their peaceful cooperation. The wide variety of Roman-made objects found in parts of Scotland also implies that its ancient inhabitants were happy to take on aspects of Romano-British culture. James Fraser even goes as far as to describe the idea of a brave Caledonian resistance of Rome as a ‘fairytale’, and suggests than any disruption caused by the tribes may have been more motivated by a desire for further bribery than any virtuous defence of liberty.

For the medieval and early-modern forebears of these modern historians, however, the tradition of ancient Scotland’s rejection of Rome was a powerful and enduring one, a myth which became even more potent during the
political and social turbulence of the eighteenth century. As symbolic of a nation’s brave defence of her liberty, and evidence of her martial abilities, few periods offered a more stirring evocation of Scottish courage and virtue. With its imagery of victory over foreign domination and defeat of invaders from the south, it was a useful analogy for more current concerns, be they the threat of English invasion, the perceived loss of statehood in the British Union or the erosion of Gaelic identity. As this article has demonstrated, the image of freedom-fighting Caledonians was strong enough to repel even the rampant eighteenth-century reverence for Rome, despite the vigorous efforts of a handful of classically-minded antiquarians. Although less strongly felt today, its influence on the tartanry and Highlandism of modern times is evident. Ossian and his Caledonians may be long dead, but somewhere, on a craggy Highland mountain top, their kilt-wearing, bagpipe-playing spirits live on.

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3 For clarity, I will refer to the indigenous peoples met by the Romans in Scotland as ‘Caledonians’, unless nominated otherwise by specific sources. In fact, the identity and provenance of these tribes (variably referred to as Caledonians, Picts and Scots) has been much debated over the centuries, the discussion often influenced by anxieties surrounding the supposed lineage of later Scots, and the validity of their independent monarchy. The subject is explored in detail in William Ferguson, The Identity of the Scottish Nation: An Historic Quest (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), eg. pp. 157, 165 and 190. See also Dauvit Broun, ‘The Picts’ Place in the Kingship’s Past Before John of Fordun’ and Colin Kidd, ‘The Ideological Uses of the Picts, 1707-1990’, both in Edwards Cowan and Richard Finlay (eds), Scottish History: The Power of the Past (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), pp. 11-28 and pp. 169-90.


7 Ibid. p. 82. This name for the Roman wall, later ‘Grim’s Dyke’ or ‘Graham’s Dyke’, was in common usage until the nineteenth century.

8 For the influence of Roman authors on Scotland’s humanist historiography see David Allan, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993) pp. 32-3.

9 For Boece’s interpretation and elaboration of Tacitus, see Hector Boece, *The History and Chronicles of Scotland…Translated by John Bellenden* (Edinburgh: W. & C. Tait. 1821) pp. 139-63.


13 McGinnis and Williamson, *George Buchanan*, p. 139. This translation is by McGinnis and Williamson.


17 See for example the manuscript notebook in the National Library of Scotland Adv. MSS.15.1.1.


20 National Library of Scotland Adv.MS.33.5.16, f.76.


26 National Library of Scotland Adv.MS.29.1.2 (iv), f.75.


28 Ibid., p. 135.


38 National Records of Scotland GD18/5051.

39 National Records of Scotland GD18/5031/14.


41 National Records of Scotland GD18/5058.


45 This copy is now held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, reference Bodl.533.7 G.42.


Ibid., p. 39.

Ibid., pp. 46-7.

Ibid., p. 49.

Ibid., pp. 29-30.

Ibid., p. 52.


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73 George Chalmers, *Caledonia, Or, An Account Historical and Topographical of North Britain* Vol. 1 (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1807), p. 8, 116. The ‘Roman Bath’ is presumably Burghead Well, a subterranean construction of unknown date which is not considered Roman today.
74 On the later eighteenth-century role of material culture, particularly tartan, in identifying the Highlander as both distinct from and part of the new British identity, see Matthew Dziennik, ‘Whig Tartan: Material Culture and its Use the Scottish Highlands 1746-1815’, *Past and Present* 217 (November 2012) pp. 117-47.
75 For the nineteenth-century monumental commemoration of Wallace and Bruce, see Coleman, *Remembering the Past*, pp. 39-87.
79 Ibid., p. 192.