Probus talk 10 October 2024

Roman around Stirling

Dr Murray Cook

This was a very interesting talk about how the Romans, having successfully invaded Britain gradually moved north, interacted with the tribes in what is now Scotland. In all there were three invasions. The Romans wanted territory to be incorporated into the empire, and the people to become "consumers", so contributing taxes.

The first push northwards, in the 80sAD, saw the Roman army under Agricola move north, crossing the River Forth near Stirling, a strategic point at that time, and proceeding up the east coast almost as far as the Moray Firth. The Romans, whilst marching, would walk 20 miles on average, before camping and only where it was flat with no trees around. These "camps" have all been traced and it was noted that they stayed to the flatter areas rather than the highlands. The Roman army was highly organised and the camps laid out a defined pattern. Around the same time they built a series of forts along the Gask ridge and to control access to the glens, thereby establishing control over the area. A detailed description was given of them. There were excellent maps on display and pictures of the sites. Murray had excavated some of these, even finding remnants of pizza ovens. He had also investigated Pictish sites from Roman and earlier times; the majority showed signs of having been burnt down for reasons unknown.

When Hadrian became emperor, he stopped territorial expansion. He instructed that a wall be built coast to coast from the Solway to the Tyne. The forts north of the Forth were abandoned as the Romans withdrew south. The wall was used to control trade as well as protection

Some 20 years later the next emperor, Antoninus Pius, marched north and built a wall linking the Clyde and Forth. This was garrisoned for the next 40 years, after which the Romans moved back to Hadrian's wall. It was likely that the resources and taxes from the region were insufficient to justify the cost of the garrisons north of Hadrian's wall.

The third invasion, around 210 AD, was briefer but more brutal. Emperor Septimus Severus led a large army north of Stirling killing many of the Caledonians, but no attempt was made to reoccupy the territory.

Post 300AD raiding by the Picts into the south weakened Roman Britain and the Romans eventually withdrew.