Roman Roads

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The Romans only spent around 100 years attempting to colonise Scotland but in that time they built a vast network of roads linking their various camps, forts, fortlets, watchtowers and beacons. Their roads were not, as is often assumed, the first in Scotland and they created a variety of quality of road, which has resulted in a mixed record of Roman roads that are now known to us. The major routes are generally known but the less well built or quickly abandoned are recorded piecemeal leaving us with a jigsaw of routes.

It is often assumed that Roman roads were the first roads to have been created in Scotland but it is fairer to say that they are the first roads to have been ‘built’ in Scotland. The Romans have received a great deal of credit for their road building programme as their roads run largely in straight lines linking major settlements and they were engineered to such a high standard that people were still using many of their roads more than 1,000 years later.

In any discussion on Roman roads it is worth bearing in mind that the Romans entered a country that would already have been well served by routes that criss-crossed the country. The principal reason that we travel on roads now is that the country is enclosed by geographical features such as hills, rivers, forests and cultivated land that restricts movement and this was no less relevant prior to the invasion of the Romans. The big difference is that over the last 2,000 years more land has been cleared, drained, cultivated and managed. 2000 years ago a far larger proportion of the land would have consisted of bog and forest and so would have been as difficult to move through as cultivated land is now. Boggy moors and forestry dominated the lowlands forcing travellers to stick to the high ground above the tree line. People would have created desire lines over what was left of the landscape that were easy to travel over exactly as we do now when finding the best route up a hill.

Despite the existence of routes of travel pre-dating the Roman invasion, proving that a route pre-dates the Roman invasion has proved difficult. Discovering a pre-Roman road is something of a holy grail in Scotland but there are many fascinating examples in England like the Ridgeway and its parallel lower neighbour, the Icknield Way. Most examples in England follow the general rule of pre-Roman roads in that they stick to the more accessible high ground and follow the top of ridge systems.

There are some candidate routes that may pre-date the Roman occupation such as the Minchmoor track, a route that appears to have a relationship with a mysterious earthwork that runs from the north east to Linglie Hill. Little is known about the origin or purpose of this earthwork but antiquarians saw it as linking with numerous sections of ditch and rampart that are more or less extant between Linglie Hill and Robert's Linn, the waterfall between Hawick and Newcastleton. Antiquarians felt that these earthworks were all part of the same feature and the Ordnance Survey labelled the extant sections "Catrail or Pictswork Ditch" and the common theory was that they represented a defensive fortification for the native people using the Minchmoor regularly to the west and the incursive Romans to the east. More recently these earthworks have been interpreted as boundaries for medieval deer parks. The difficulty in dating these earthworks is indicative of the difficulty in dating roads as they were worn rather than constructed and so there are no building techniques or methods to reveal an age to the road.

Other candidates for routes that pre-date the Roman invasion are the very roads developed by the Romans. A system of routes of travel would already have been developed by the native population and the Romans may simply have formalised these by giving some of them a more solid structure. This is surely particularly the case with some of the roads that don't follow a straight line like the road between Moffat and Abington.

Another system of travel that should certainly not be underestimated are the routes over water. In many parts of Scotland, particularly in the Western Highlands and Argyll the numerous lochs and difficult terrain made travel by boat far quicker and easier than land travel.

Many pre-Roman boats have been found throughout Scotland such as Log Boats, which are canoe shaped structures hewn from single tree trunks. 150 log boats have been found in Scotland, mostly dating from 500BC to 1000AD although the famous Carpow logboat, one of 7 found in the Tay estuary, dates to 3000BC so there would have been a lot of trade and travel all around Scotland by water based transport. Another type of water based transport noted by Julius Caesar as being common in Britain before the Roman invasion was a coracle, a small flat bottomed boat resembling half a walnut that was made of thin planks or rods covered in animal hide. Being far less substantial than the log boats these tend not to survive in the archaeological record but remains have been found near Dalgety Bay that were interpreted as a coracle.

In 79AD, the Romans under Agricola invaded Scotland and advanced as far as the River Tay. The following year, forts were established on the Clyde-Forth line and areas already over-run consolidated. In 81AD, Agricola moved troops into the west and south-west and investigated the possibility of a west coast invasion route as well as an invasion of Ireland. The year after that he

led his forces northward up the east coast until his victory at Mons Grapius (exact site unknown) in 83AD. This was followed by a period of consolidation (the Flavian period) but troops had to be transferred from Britain to the Balkans to make up for losses and this led to a gradual withdrawal over the next few years to the Tyne-Solway line, certainly by the turn of the century. In 142 AD, they readvanced (the Antonine period), this time to the line of the Clyde and Forth where they built the Antonine Wall. Loudoun Fort was reoccupied and fortlets and a road in the Greenock-Largs area were built. Again, they stayed for about 20 years but withdrew to Hadrian's Wall in the 160s ADwith the exception of some forts in the south west from which patrols could be mounted.

The Romans built at least two main arteries coming from the south, one coming through Carlisle, meandering its way to Lockerbie and then heading north following closely what is now the M74 at least as far as Abington but probably continuing north to cross the River Clyde at Castledykes Roman Fort, a little upstream of Lanark. The course of this route is difficult to trace between Abington and the Clyde but from Lanark it can be traced heading north towards Cumbernauld with a likely destination of Castlecary or Croy Fort on Antonine’s Wall. The other major artery to have been employed by the Romans to penetrate Scotland is Dere Street, coming north from Corbridge in England to Bo’ness with sections following a characteristically straight line and a branch off to the Roman Port of Inveresk in Musselburgh where 3 Roman Altar stones have been discovered suggesting it was an important place for the Romans. These two main roads are linked in at least two places with a road over Craik Muir and another following the southern escarpment of the Pentlands and meeting the more westerly road just west of Biggar.

In addition to these four roads there was also a spur road that serviced a Fortlet at Durisdeer, one of the best preserved Roman Fortlets in Britain. It is unclear if this road continues further into Dumfries and Galloway but it is unlikely that the small distance of the road and the small fortlet represent the limits of the Romans advance into Dumfries and Galloway unless they simply ran out of time.

Continuing from the Antonine Wall seems to have been by Falkirk to cross the River Forth at Stirling and we pick up another arterial road at Ardoch Fort near Braco. The road leaving here has been well mapped since Roy's Military Survey. It went in a straight line north east to cross the Machany Water and the Earn at Muthill and from there it ran along the Gask Ridge system, the first of the Roman boundaries in northern Britain, which was built in the 70sAD and pre-dated Hadrian’s Wall by 50 years. Rather than being a built barrier like both Hadrian and Antonine Walls, this boundary was a natural system of hills in a straight line, which the Romans utilised by reinforcing with a number of forts and towers and a road running along its length.

In addition to these there are many small sections of Roman road spread throughout the country that are more difficult to link with the main network. Among these are the Elsick Mounth that linked two Roman forts in Aberdeenshire, the Roman road that forded the Tay at Bertha Roman Fort, Perth and continued to the north east and the Roman patrol track that went from Bishopton to Largs over what is now known as the Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park – this road showing one of the less permanently built roads and subsequently more difficult to find.

Clearly there was a lot of Roman activity in Scotland at least as far north as Aberdeenshire and to go with this there must have been a network of roads as well. These roads consist of a wide variety of surfaces and construction techniques making it very difficult to locate them and just as difficult to positively date them. However, some are unmistakable due to the straightness or quality and some can be discerned through the evident Roman sites they link but many more are likely waiting to be found.