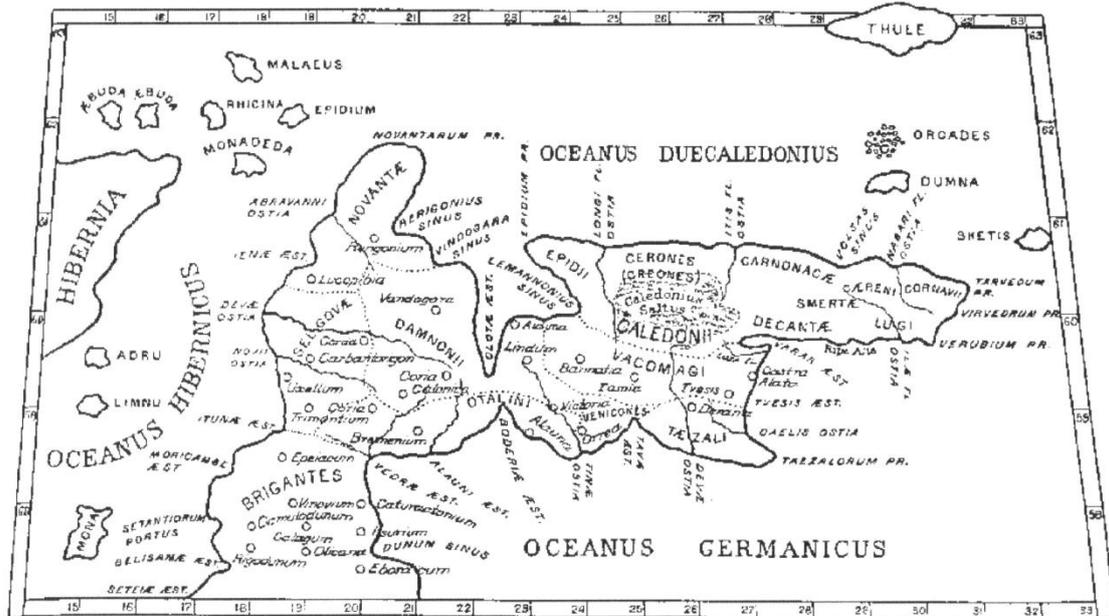


Ptolemy's Map of Scotland – an Alternative Interpretation

In the geography of Claudius Ptolemy, dating from the second century AD we are offered a curious map of Britain. The map shows the Roman province of Britannia with the unconquered areas of Scotland apparently rotated west-east through a right angle; but here, I shall refer to the north of Britain at this era as Caledonia rather than as Scotland.



The Map of Claudius Ptolemy (after McBain)

Ptolemy is believed to have taken his northern geography from an earlier map made by Marinus of Tyre (c. AD 100-120), who is thought to have obtained his details of Caledonia from a quite different source to that of the Roman province to the south. The absence of any mention of Hadrian's Wall tells us that the source predates the Stanegate frontier and may therefore offer us a snapshot of Caledonia dating from the earlier period of the Flavian expedition around AD 80-84.

Most of our meagre list Pictish words are names taken from Ptolemy's geography. [1] In **Picts and Ancient Britons** I explored the possibility that *Pictish*, the language spoken in the North before the Scottish kingdom absorbed the Picts, may have been a Finnic language closely related to Finnish and Estonian. This would be in line with the Picts own traditions of origin, but at odds with the view that specialists have held for so many years. [See: Note 1] Modern DNA evidence now contradicts the old doctrine that the northern tribes were Celts. If the names on Ptolemy's map of Caledonia were indeed Finnic then it would make Ptolemy's names the oldest written form of any Finnic language.

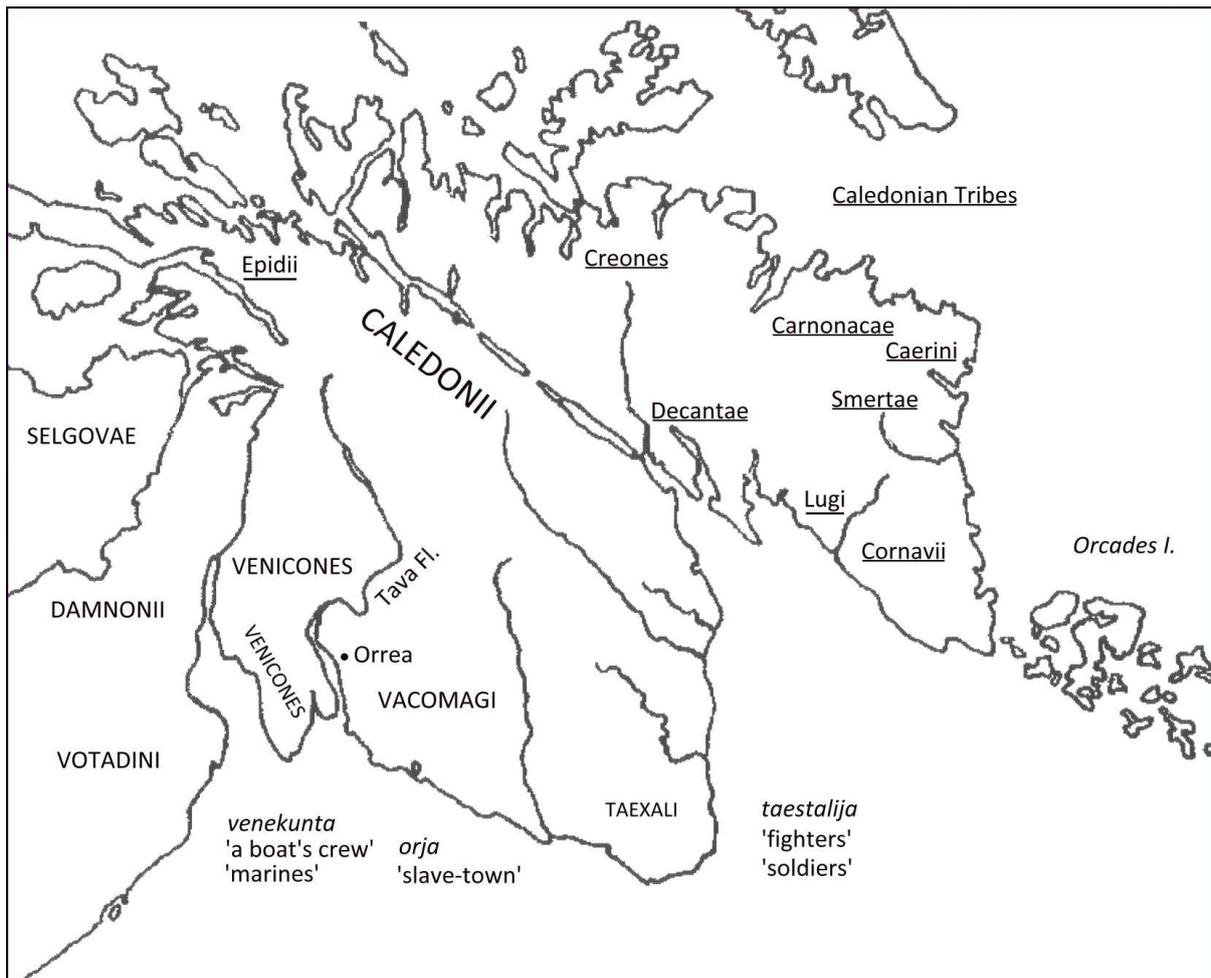
An alternative explanation that I left unexplored in the 1998 book was that the map used by Marinus was actually made by Rome's northern proto-Pictish allies; and that Marinus may have mistaken the disposition of the Roman and allied forces to be tribal names. This possibility can only be seen by analogy with a Finnic vocabulary.

Our knowledge of Agricola's expedition to the North-East comes only from the writings of Tacitus. He does not acknowledge that Rome had any client kingdoms or allies in the region; although this

would have been normal diplomatic practice as with the Brigantes further south. He does however tell us that Agricola left his troops over winter in the territory of a tribe named the 'Boresti'; a name unknown from any other source. [2] The accepted explanation is that it simply means: 'a northern tribe'.

The earliest clue that we have comes from Cicero (54 BC). He ventures in a letter that the only economic justification for a conquest of Britain might be the acquisition of slaves. [3] From Saint Patrick we know that the later Picts traded in slaves. [4] A non-contemporary account by Eutropius (AD 360) contradicts Tacitus, saying that the Orkney Islands had submitted to Rome in AD 43 as soon as the Claudian conquest began. [5] May we suppose then, that the Orcadians were Rome's allies in the North? The possibility that the Orcadian-Picts were slave-traders is suggested by the name 'Orrea' as a city that was situated somewhere near the River Tay. The Finnish word *Orja* means: 'a slave'.

We find two further names on the map that may have been misinterpreted. The first of these is the name 'Venicones' (or perhaps 'Venecontes' – a manuscript variant) supposedly a tribe occupying the Fife peninsula. Again in Finnish we find *Venekunta* which means 'a boat's crew'; therefore one may suggest a meaning: 'sailors' or 'marines'. Perhaps Fife was the base of the Roman or allied navy? It must have been there somewhere to support Agricola; and we are told that it circumnavigated the north of Britain while the army wintered with the Boresti. [6]



Ptolemy's names shown on a rotated modern map of Scotland (other places and rivers omitted)

In the Grampian triangle we find the 'Taexali', a name that has never been convincingly explained as p-Celtic. The nearest equivalent in Finnish is *Taistelija*. This word means: 'a fighter' or a 'combatant' (verb: *taistella*: 'to fight a battle') hence perhaps an interpretation: 'soldiers' or 'warriors' may be appropriate. One may suggest that this is showing us the disposition of the Roman legion, which fought the battle at Mons Graupius somewhere in this region.

These three coincidences are indicative taken alone. However, other words from the map and later sources also show strong cognates. It may be that either a Pict or perhaps a Roman has rendered the various Pictish words and names phonetically into the Latin alphabet, which fortunately is the same one as used today for most European languages, including Finnish.

It may be that the other tribal names in the interior and west coast are just a list of regional Caledonian tribes; as distinct from the 'proto-Pictish' tribes of Orkney and the east coast. This would concur with the situation later around AD 208 when we find Severus now opposed by just two northern tribes named as Caledonii and Maeatae. [7]

This name 'Maeatae' would further support a Finnic interpretation as, in Finnish, the word *miehet* means simply: 'the men'. This would concur with the Picts own myth of origin as given in various sources, of which the best known is Bede. [8] He tells us that the Pictish invaders came from Scythia (which here implies the Baltic coast region of Russia); also that they were all-male and they obtained wives from the Irish.

This interpretation would suggest that, during the Flavian conquest, the Romans were able to penetrate so far to the north only with the acquiescence of their Orcadian allies; but sometime in the early second century this alliance collapsed. In later centuries we find Caledonians and Maeatae as unified opponents of Rome under the general name of Picts. The tribes of the west coast and islands seem to have remained unhindered by Rome until as late as the fourth century when we find them as Attacotti and Scots, raiding the ailing province of Britannia alongside the Picts. [9]

Further investigation of all the sources may be found in **Picts and Ancient Britons** and the various etymologies may now be investigated via any good online translator (*but see Note 1 Below). Sceptics may say that such linguistic coincidences could be found with any language, to which I say: try it and see; you will only find these correspondences with Finnic languages.

Note 1:

Although lay-persons may make their own comparisons with modern languages; it should be noted that all the suggested Finnic derivations here and in the 1998 book were based on the ancient native Finnish vocabulary as defined by Lauri Hakulinen in "The Structure and Development of the Finnish language" (1961). [10] These root words he defined as deriving from the proto-Finnic language as it was spoken in the region of the Gulf of Finland in the years around the beginning of the Christian era (with some dating from the earlier Finno-Ugrian period). This would be contemporary with the supposed Pictish invasion as described in the various sources. I add this note to forestall the inevitable criticisms of certain Celtic linguists and others who defend the p-Celtic derivations.

References

1. Based on MacBain (1891-2) 'Ptolemy's Geography of Scotland', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 21, pp 191-214
2. Tacitus, *Agricola*, 38
3. Cicero, *Ad Familiaris*, VII,16,7 (letter to Trebatius)
4. Saint Patrick, *Epistola* 15
5. Eutropius, *Roman History*, VII,13,3
6. Tacitus, *Agricola*, 38

7. Dio Cassius, Roman History, LXXVII, 12, 1-4
8. Bede, Ecclesiastical History, 1,1
9. Ammianus Marcellinus, Library of History, XXVII, 8, 5

10. Hakulinen, Lauri, *The Structure and Development of the Finnish Language*, translated by John Atkinson, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana (1961)

Tags: Picts, Ptolemy's Map, Caledonia, Venicones, Taexali, Maeatae, Agricola, ancient Scotland

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