STAYING GREEN IN A SEA OF PURPLE:
HOW THE EMERALD ISLE ESCAPED THE ROMAN EMPIRE'S REACH

By Diana K. Batchelor // CARS 2016 version

Introduction:

Predicting, provoking, and prevailing: these three strategies are what would later be used to describe the imperial strategy of Rome, and what would later lead to the transition from the early Republic of Rome to one of Western history's most powerful empires. By the time of Emperor Trajan in the second century A.D, the Roman Empire had reached an astounding size, swallowing up to roughly 2.2 million square miles of territory around the Mediterranean and Europe, including Britannia (or modern day Great Britain and Scotland). However, for what has baffled historians for quite some time, Ireland — or *Éire* in its Gaelic form — remained unconquered by the Roman blade despite their lingering presence in Ireland's neighbor to the east; furthermore, it has been described as the only "Celtic land where the Roman eagles never flew. She alone carried into the Christian middle ages with the political, social, and cultural traditions . . . unbroken by the impact of the Mediterranean civilization."[1]

Based on Rome's recorded military prowess, one would assume conquest of Ireland would require minimal effort; indeed Julius Agricola (40 - 93 A.D.), governor of Britain in the first century, believed (according to Cornelius Tacitus) that Ireland "could be conquered and held by one legion of auxiliary troops."[2] However, Agricola made no attempt at a recorded conquest.

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[1] James F. Kenney, *The Sources For the Early History of Ireland: An Introduction and Guide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), 129.

[2] Cornelius Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania,* trans. H. Mattingly (London: Penguin Books, 1948), 75.

Yet, that is not to suggest that Ireland remained entirely isolated. There is strong archaeological evidence to suggest that Roman merchants established trading posts north of Dublin, as well as along the eastern coast of Ireland.[3] Nevertheless, it is only to this extent that the Roman empire engaged with Ireland. Though early sources like Julius Caesar (c.100 B.C. - 44 B.C.)[4] and Ptolemy (c. 100 C.E. - c.170 C.E.)[5] note the presence of Ireland as early as 50 B.C, others like Tacitus (56 C.E. - c.120 C.E.) suggest early ambitions to engage in militaristic conquest, but none would ever come true. Based on archeological evidence and a contextualized approach to fill the gaps in the available literary sources, it can be argued that at a macro level, Ireland stayed out of Rome's grasp for three reasons: the first being Rome's own internal problems concerning the maintenance of such an extensive empire, the second being external threats including the presence of pirates in the Irish Sea, and finally the established kingdoms of the Celts in Ireland, which ultimately led to the formation of a distinct and unified culture which could resist Rome.

These conclusions will be supported by a three part analysis, which have been shortened in the interest of time. Ultimately, this will shape a comprehensive assessment of how Ireland was able to maintain its remoteness until the arrival of Christianity brought by Saint Patrick in 432 A.D.

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[3] F. Haverfield, "Ancient Rome and Ireland," *The English Historical Review* 28 (1929): 2, accessed November 28, 2015, http://www.jstor.org/stable/550876.

[4] Kenney, *The Sources For the Early History of Ireland*, 129.

[5] ibid., 129.

Part I: Rome in Late Antiquity (1st Century A.D.)

At the end of the second century A.D., Enlightenment historian Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) describes the Roman Empire as being at the pinnacle of its power; it was the [quote] "fairest part of the earth, and the most civilized portion of mankind."[6] Prior to this Golden Age, however, there was a continually evolving and developing Empire after the death of Augustus Caesar in the early first century. With emperors like Vespasian (r. 69-79 A.D.), his eldest son Titus (r. 79-91 A.D.) and his youngest son Domitian (r. 81-96 A.D.), the Roman Empire would see an increase in material wealth and acquired resources.[7] By the time of Emperor Trajan at the turn of the second century, Rome's economic status had grown considerably, resulting in an increase in trading around the Mediterranean and Europe.[8]

Furthermore, Rome's campaign in Britannia is of special note. The first Roman to set foot in Britain was Julius Caesar (100 B.C. - 44 B.C.). However, it is the arrival of Julius Agricola (40 - 93 A.D.) nearly a century after Caesar that is of great significance.[9]

Agricola was appointed governor by Emperor Vespasian in 78 A.D. Much of what is known about him comes from the admiring biographical account written by Roman historian (and Agricola's son-in-law) Cornelius Tacitus (c. 55 - c. 117 A.D).[10] Tacitus' describes Agricola as "handsome rather than imposing . . . One could easily see in him

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[6] Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: Volume I* (New York: The Heritage Press, 1946), 1.

[7] Mary T. Boatwright et al., *The Romans: From Village to Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 365.

[8] ibid., 380.

[9] *BBC History*, s.v. "Agricola (40-93 A.D.), http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/agricola.shtml.

[10] Ronald Mellor, *The Historians of Ancient Rome: An Anthology of Major Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 76.

a good man, and would have been glad to believe him great."[11] His military accomplishments obviously propelled him to greatness as he was tasked with the mission to combat the lingering inhabitants of Britain. Tacitus' narrative offers a partial glimpse into Agricola's combative style:

> Meanwhile, he gave the enemy no rest from the raids of his flying columns, and then, when he had sufficiently terrorized them, he would pardon their resistance and hold before their eyes the attractions of peace . . . and this was done so carefully and methodically that no new part of Britain was ever won over after so little [effort].[12]

One historian describes Agricola's perspective as seeing "virtue in some of the better-class young men in Britain who accepted the new educational opportunities which he offered."[13] To the historian who recognizes the typically harsh and judgmental Roman eye (for Romans viewed anyone who was not Roman as equatable to uncivilized barbarians), this analysis offers a glimpse into the surprising imperial character of Agricola.

However, every empire has a limit, and Rome was no different. Rome's far reaching imperial conquests may have increased the amount of resources taken in, but the forces outside the frontiers proved threatening. As seen in earlier Roman history, perpetual conquest resulted in an increase in imperial debt. Furthermore, by the time Agricola was appointed governor of Britannia, Rome faced disaster with the "extravagance of [the insane Roman Emperor] Nero, [a] civil war, and the Jewish and Germano-Gallic revolts", which had nearly depleted the Roman treasury roughly about

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[11] Andrew Robert Burn, *Agricola and Roman Britain* (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1953), 167.
[12] Tacitus, "The Life of Agricola," quoted in Andrew Robert Burn. *Agricola and Roman Britain*, 96.
[13] J.P.V.D. Balson, *Romans and Aliens* (London: The University of North Carolina Press Chapel Hill, 1979), 66.

a decade before Vespasian took the throne.[14] Thus, during Agricola's time, Rome faced a time of economic weariness.

Despite these economic troubles and the constant threat of outside forces in such an extensive empire, Agricola remained ambitious in Britannia. Any discussions of halting conquest by his advisors were out of the question. There were two arguments to suggest opposition to a halt in conquest. The first is "that of prestige;" the second (which is of most interest) is the "argument, very familiar to the Romans, that the existence of kindred and neighboring tribes in a state of freedom outside the empire set a bad example and was productive of unrest among recently conquered peoples inside it."[15] The latter is what Agricola would use to justify his intentions of extending into Ireland.[16]

Part II: The Celts' Arrival in Ireland, Celtic Civilization, & Roman Perspectives

The analysis of ancient Irish history has proved to be a challenging objective for modern historians. In contrast to what historians are supplied with when studying Ancient Roman history, what is known of ancient Irish history primarily comes from the Irish monks in monasteries after the arrival of Saint Patrick in 432 A.D., and into the early Middle Ages. Even further, these Irish monks recorded oral histories, traditions that were held sacred to the ancient Irish because "narrative-based rhetoric [was used] . . . to preserve their cultural values. [Furthermore], facility with eloquent language . . . was a

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[14] Boatwright et al., *The Romans: From Village to Empire*, 361.
[15] Burn. *Agricola and Roman Britain*, 105.
[16] ibid., 105.

prelude to power."[17] It is this "narrative-based rhetoric, steeped in legend, myth, and magic [that] promoted and preserved Irish culture and values."[18]

The origin of the ancient peoples in Ireland (before the arrival of the Celts in 500 B.C.) is practically unknown. Other than having a particular set of oral histories and rhetorical structures that differ from the typical Greco-Roman rhetoric, political organization of the small villages across the Emerald Isle were led primarily by a chief (or in Gaelic, a *rì tùaithe*).[19] When the initial wave of Celts arrived roughly in 500 B.C, they merged much of the tradition of the people they conquered with their own, rather than dismantling it completely. Interestingly, this also includes their belief in ancient Druidism, which was made up of magic, mythology, and divination.[20]

The significance of Celtic culture is extremely noteworthy, for "only in Ireland did there survive a language, and literature, that sprang directly from the ancient Celts, uncontaminated by Imperial Rome."[21] Indeed for a time, Ireland was a world of its own; it was an "illiterate, aristocratic, semi-nomadic, Iron Age warrior culture, its wealth based on animal husbandry and slavery."[22]

Moreover, a careful examination of literary sources indicates that centuries before Agricola's time as governor, the Romans had knowledge of the existence of an island is to the west of Britain. Julius Caesar was the first to invade Britain and

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[17] Richard Johnson-Sheehan and Paul Lynch, "Rhetoric of Myth, Magic, and Conversion: A Prolegomena to Ancient Irish Rhetoric," *Rhetoric Review* 26 (2007): 234, accessed November 24, 2015. http://0-www.jstor.org.libra.naz.edu/stable/20176789.
[18] ibid., 234.
[19] ibid., 234.
[20] ibid., 242.
[21] T.G.E. Powell, *The Celts* (London: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1956), 57.
[22] Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 81.

document his experience in a collection titled *Notes on the Gallic War* (c. 58-50 B.C.).[23] In this work, Caesar is the first to give a name to Ireland by calling it *Hibernia*, or a "false analogy with the latin *hibernus*, [for] 'wintry.'"[24] This would be his only description.

The narrative of Ireland after Caesar's initial description seems to fade for decades until it is mentioned again by a Greek geographer named Strabo (c. 64 B.C. - c. 21 C.E.), who briefly discusses Ireland (which he calls *Ierne*) and its inhabitants based on what he had gathered from traders, travelers, and sources of his time.[25] Like many Greco-Roman writers, Strabo's *Geography* (c. 17-23 A.D.) is not cordial towards these barbarians: "Writers of the present time have nothing to say of anything beyond *Ierne . . .* the natives are wholly savage and lead a wretched existence because of the cold. In my opinion it is there that the limits of habitable earth should be fixed."[26] Furthermore, Strabo also asserts that these natives "eat their ancestors and commit incest."[27]

Additionally, Greek writer Ptolemy created a vital (c. 100 C.E. - c.170 C.E.) map of the island in the second century. His map, though askew in comparison to modern depictions, is of great importance, for it is "the most complete and detailed [description of Ireland] found among all Greek and Roman writers" and is essential to early Irish history.[28] Moreover, Ptolemy's map is crucial to the study of early Irish history because he uses astronomical and mathematical data to create a somewhat accurate map. His

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[23] Kenney, *The Sources For the Early History of Ireland*, 129.
[24] ibid., 129.
[25] ibid.,130.
[26] Strabo, *Geography*, quoted in Kenney, *The Sources For the Early History of Ireland*, 130.
[27] Daniela Dueck, *Strabo of Amasia* (London, US: Routledge, 2002), 172.
[28] Kenney, *The Sources For the Early History of Ireland*, 133.

map also identifies "a number of place-names and tribal names that are surprisingly recognizable."[29]

When discussing Agricola's fixed sights on the isle to the west, Tacitus described it as:

> The interior parts are little known, but through commercial intercourse and the merchants there is better knowledge of the harbors and approaches.[30]

Tacitus' initial description validates a number of arguments. First, this confirms that early Roman sources clearly had a good idea of the existence of Ireland, its unforgiving climate and geographic location, and its inhabitants. Second, the movement of talk about Ireland, as relied on by early writers, indicates forms of travel and commerce between Ireland and Rome. Tacitus affirms that there were legitimate examples of trading and established trading posts. Thus, trade networks were nothing new to Agricola's time in the first century A.D. His interest in conquest would follow suit accordingly.

Part III: Relations between Celtic Ireland and the Roman Empire

Furthermore, Tacitus suggests that "the approaches to Ireland and its harbors were known through commerce and traders. Who these traders were, and whence they came, he does not say", though there is strong archaeological evidence in the form of currency that proves that these traders were from the Roman Empire, especially since these coins have names and faces of their Emperors (current to their time).[31] For example, north of county Down, "coins of Vespasian" were found; south of Dublin,

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29 Paul F. State, *A Brief History of Ireland* (New York: Facts on File Inc., 2009), 19.
30 Tacitus, *Agricola and the Germania,* 74-75.
31 ibid., 2.

"Roman copper coins, some of Hadrian and Trajan" were uncovered in skeletal graves; in county Meath "fifteen coins of Constantine the Great;" and in county Leitrim, "perhaps 100 coins [ranging from] Florian, Probus, Carinus, Diocletian, Maximian, and Constantine the Great."[32]

Again, it's important to note that the archeological evidence found ranges around the eastern coast of Ireland facing Britain. Indeed, the pieces that have been discovered are typically coined currency, which in of itself does not yield a vast amount of information, but it may suggest a couple of probable circumstances. First, the discovery of coins only adds to the growing argument of established trade networks. Additionally, the discovery of vast amounts of coins and no other artifacts demonstrates no permanent settlement by Roman forces in Ireland, which thus verifies no militaristic campaigns and settlements in the island.

Moreover, though it has been established that Agricola intended conquest in Ireland, he may have been far too arrogant and thus overestimated the Celtic kingdoms that had been established in Ireland centuries before his time as governor. Though the Roman authors described the Celtic inhabitants as "completely savage and [leading] a miserable life because of the cold,"[33] they were unified and established in various sections of society.[34] It's extremely plausible to suggest that if Rome had engaged in a militaristic conquest they would have faced a tough fight.

In addition to the unified inhabitants of Ireland, one historian suggests that Agricola may have also overlooked the existence of pirates in the Irish Sea. Moreover,

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[32] Haverfield, "Ancient Rome and Ireland," 10-12.
[33] J.P.V.D. Balson, *Romans and Aliens*, 59.
[34] Henri Hubert, *The Rise of the* Celts (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1934), 229-230.

pirates existed along trade routes in the ancient world, and had been an issue for the

Roman Empire since the early centuries B.C. Thus, the "circumstances of the ancient

world make it fairly certain that the Irish Sea was never absolutely free from pirates."[35]

The extent to which pirates may have played a role in Agricola's inaction towards

Ireland is unknown, but it is reasonable to mention their presence as a compounding

threat to Roman intent in Ireland.

However, foreign threats such as pirates were not the only hazards to Roman

plans for the conquest in Ireland. Just as Agricola set his sights on the Emerald Isle, the

threat of the Britons in Northern Scotland distracted Agricola in 93 A.D.[36] To Ireland's

luck, this campaign in the north of Britain by Agricola would be his last. Just as he and

his military won a decisive campaign against the Britons in Perthshire and were about to

resume plans for Ireland, Agricola was recalled back to Rome by Emperor Domitian (r.

81-96 A.D.). It is here where Tacitus "had no more to relate of [Agricola's] actions [in

Britannia]."[37] Thus it can be concluded that Roman conquest in Ireland was, and in

subsequent years, not to be.

Conclusion:

Julius Agricola was recalled to Rome in 93 A.D. and died later that year. Though

his ambitious spirit was a clear example of the ideal Roman imperialist, he

underestimated the united forces of Celts across the Irish Seas and the threat of pirates.

Though there were centuries of trade as indicated by the physical archeological

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[35] Haverfield, "Ancient Rome and Ireland," 7.

[36] W. Pinkerton, "Ancient Roman Intercourse with Ireland," *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 5 (1857): 1, accessed February 6, 2016, http://0-www.jstor.org.libra.naz.edu/stable/20608819, 33.

[37] ibid., 34.

evidence discovered in Ireland, there was no further military conquest by Rome after Agricola left. Thus, it is with these compounding forces — in addition to the internal and external troubles the Romans had to deal with — that ultimately explain how Ireland stayed out of Rome's reach.

Some may suggest that it was the mythical legend of Irish luck that shielded Ireland from Rome, which I find highly unlikely; I nevertheless have attempted to combat this view with primary literary sources and archeological evidence as well as historically contextualized probability. Perhaps future study and archeological excavation may yield more concrete answers to fill in the gaps of the unknowns. For now, Ireland's history of avoiding Roman imperialism is something at which to marvel.

Ireland was not subjected to outside influence until the arrival of Saint Patrick in c. 432 A.D. The rest is history. Nevertheless, it is a solid historical fact to acknowledge that Ireland was one of the few entities in the ancient world to resist the Roman Empire's hungry imperial belly. Hopefully this contribution to the historical community will open the door to further study of one of history's most fascinating cultures, one that defied outside influence and survived to create a unique identity of ancient origin.

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