

Original Paper

Research on the Historical Value of the *Agricola*

Jialing Dai^{1*}

¹ Suzhou University of Science and Technology, Suzhou City, Jiangsu Province, China

* Jialing Dai, Corresponding author

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Abstract

Tacitus's Biography of Agricola is the first work on Britannia history that has been handed down to date, and occupies an important position in the western historical circle. Tacitus expressed his ideals by defending and glorifying his father-in-law. Therefore, he left behind the most concentrated and rich account of the political history of Roman Britannia. Based on this biography, this paper discusses the life and achievements of Governor Agricola, the "Romanization" of Britannia, the customs and social conditions of Britannia. However, there are many problems in this biography, such as incorrect records, vague expressions and exaggerated rhetoric. Therefore, it is an important way to get out of the predicament to fully learn from archaeological and other handed down documents.

Keywords

Agricola, Tacitus, roman Britannia, the value of historical materials

1. Introduction

Tacitus as a historian has long been highly valued by scholars. Thompson called it the greatest name in Roman historiography, comparable to Thucydides. Chen Qineng praised his rigorous and serious attitude towards history, and his works have high historical value. Even the short biography of Agricola has attracted much academic attention in recent years. It is considered not only from the perspective of philology, vocabulary and structure of the text, but also from the perspective of biographical history and political history. However, there are still many problems in this biography. And most scholars' research is based on this biography, and to some extent, they ignore the newly unearthed archaeological inscriptions in recent years. This led to a bias in their conclusions. In view of this, this paper tries to explore the historical value of the biography of *Agricola* by combing through the great achievements of the biography of *Agricola*, the social economy and customs of Britannia. Through the analysis of documents and archaeological inscriptions, the paper discusses the trap of unequal importance between the number of historical materials and historical facts, and tries to answer the importance of multiple

historical materials in the process of ancient history writing.

2. The Value of Historical Materials

2.1 *Research Agricola and the Britannia Governors*

From Claudius to Diocletian, the Roman Empire appointed nearly 70 governors in the Britannia provinces, 58 of whom were known by name. But the Agricola is the only detailed and direct history of the Roman governors of Britannia. This biography records in detail the life and activities of the biographer; It also deals with the related content of the governors such as Paulinus and Maxim. This biography has become an important historical material for the study of the historical figure and the Britannia governor.

Gnaeus Agricola was born into the knighthood class in the Roman colony of Gaul, in the town of Forum Julii, where both his grandfather and his maternal grandfather served as imperial Treasury officials. His father, Julius Grechinus, who became a senator and was known for his study of rhetoric and philosophy, was envied by Caligula for his sense of justice and was eventually persecuted to death. Therefore, Agricola was raised by his mother. He served under the Britannia governors Paulinus and Cylearis, served as commander of the army, Governor of the province of Aquitania, and became Governor of Britannia after leaving the consulship.

In AD 78, Agricola became Governor of Britannia. First, in his conquest, he immediately set about conquering Wales, England, and the north of Scotland. Exterminating the armed resistance of the Jawdovises and Caledonian tribes (Tac.Agr.18); Using the new tactics of sending troops to swim and surprise, march and occupy the island of Anglesey; The Battle of Graupius was won (Tac.Agr.33-37). Tacitus states that this succession of victories made Agricola famous, but he did not consider the campaign to be worth bragging about, and there was not even a "triumphal note" in the report sent to Rome (Tac.Agr.18). Second, he was a builder of military installations with a strategic vision. It is reported that he personally selected and supervised the construction of all the places where the Legion was to camp (Tac.Agr.20). The famous forts on the Isthmus of Forth and Clyde were also chosen and built by him (Tac.Agr.23). Finally, he was a clean and fair chief executive. In domestic management, business was never communicated through the released slaves; The selection of generals always insists on merit. The administration of the firm and the gentle are combined, minor errors are forgiven, and major errors are severely punished (Tac.Agr.19). In response to livelihood problems, he reduced taxes, abolished tyranny, and cracked down on corruption. In the winter of 78, Agricola learned the lessons of his predecessors and abolished tyranny (Tac.Agr.20). He took steps to curb abuse of power. The most serious of these was the expropriation of cash or in kind, especially of food for the use of the army. It was a lucrative business in which some camp commanders and centurions were involved. When the subjects had no surplus grain and the army sometimes, centurions would deliberately force grain. The grain is sold to the victims at high prices through threats and terror. The officials then requisitioned the farmers' newly purchased grain. The grain was not touched in the granaries, but the money of the

Britannia people was seized by these officials. In order to avoid the occurrence of these forced purchases, Agricola adopted the method of equalizing the burden of the people to reduce the tribute, thereby abolishing this dangerous method of extortion (Tac.Agr.19).

2.2 Research the Romanization of Britannia

The first Roman invasion of Britannia was in the time of Caesar in the middle of the first century BC, and it had been more than a hundred years by the time of Agricola. During these 100 years, the influence of Roman civilization on Britannia was considerable. The Britannia people lost their independence and freedom to a large extent and became Roman subjects and subjects, and gradually “Romanized”. This biography has become an important source for the study of the “Romanization” of Britannia.

According to this biography, the author instituted a number of policies conducive to the urbanization and Romanization of Britannia. In the first place, temples, public places, and residential buildings (Tac.Agr.21) are built, under the leadership of the government, by encouraging individuals or individuals to pay for them jointly with the public (TAC.agr.21), so that the barbaric and warlike population can live a quiet life and induce them to become accustomed to peace and abandon warlike customs in order to maintain social stability. Secondly, Roman culture permeated Britannia and directly affected the daily life of the local people. The messenger encouraged the chief’s son to receive a liberal arts education. From then on, those inhabitants of Britannia who did not accept Latin began to learn Roman speech and dress, and wearing Toga became very popular (Tac.Agr.21). The natives were gradually enchanted by the degenerate apparatuses such as flower halls, baths and elegant banquets. Tacitus says, “These are only ways in which they are enslaved, and they are foolish enough to call these things’ culture”. These acts of conciliation promoted the harmonious development of society and promoted the trend of Romanization in Britannia.

2.3 Research the Local Customs and Social Conditions of Britannia

The Biography of *Agricola* is the first work on Britannia history that has been handed down to the present day. It occupies an important position in the western historical circle and also becomes an important historical material for us to study the customs and social conditions of Britannia. This biography records the source of the Britons. Tacitus suggests that it may have been Germanic, Iberian, and Gauls from continental Europe. This is not only because of their geographical proximity, but also because their “superstitions and religious rituals closely resemble those of the Gauls, and their languages do not differ much from each other.”

According to his records, Britannia in the first century was still in the stage of military democracy at the end of primitive society. It was roughly at the same level of social development as the Germanic people and the Gauls in continental Europe. Their life gradually began to flow from nomadic to relatively settled, and agriculture has occupied a rather important position. Moreover, Britannia, which had once been ruled by several Kings, was now divided into many departments, each headed by a chieftain.

3. Existing Problems

Although the Biography of *Agricola* has high historical value, the problems in it should not be taboo. Tacitus wrote this biography in defense of his father-in-law, thus exaggerating the role of Agricola in the book, and due to the lack of geographical knowledge, the accuracy of his accounts of Britannia and other islands is questionable.

Second, 25% of *Agricola* is devoted to the battle of Gropius, it seems reasonable to assume that Tacitus considers this battle to be the battle in which Agricola became famous as a general. But some scholars have questioned the importance of Gropius and the integrity of the war. According to historical data analysis, there are indeed several points worth thinking about. First, in this campaign, he did not show a new tactical strategy, a new war principle, no superior strategy, only straightforward tactics and a large number of troops to ensure victory. Second, Tacitus considered the use of auxiliary troops in the front rather than legions to be a major innovation. However, this claim is unfounded. The tactic of staging operations and retaining reserve forces has a long history. In A.D. 70, when he faced Civilis, Cerialis kept his legions in reserve; Ostorius Scapula defeated the Iceni using only auxiliary forces. This tactic was not invented by Agricola.

Tacitus's account of Agricola's contribution to "Romanization" and urbanization in Britannia is also worthy of further investigation. Various materials fully prove that the "Romanization" of Britannia has a long history and is not the result of one person. First of all, the large number of Romanized buildings and the expansion of Roman citizenship throughout the Empire is enough to show that the process of Romanization has been promoted by official and other governors. Second, the Romanization of Britannia, driven by cultural methods such as Latin and Roman dress, continued for a long time in Britannia. Seneca credited Claudius with making Britannia a robed civilization. Third, it was a long-established principle that the sons of local chiefs should be educated in the Roman style. This both provided Rome with a hostage and ensured the pro-Roman stance of future local leaders. During Agricola's tenure, a Greek teacher named Demetrius appeared in Yorkshire. This fact shows that it is precisely because of this long-standing principle that the teacher was present in Britannia during his reign. As Martin Hennecker suggests, perhaps the Romans did not need to use force to conquer southern Britannia at all. Decades before the Roman invasion, the surrogate princes had begun to embrace Roman culture.

On the question of urban construction, the major towns of Britannia, such as Winchester, Silchester and Chichester, had grown before he became governor. In the late Claudys and early Flavians, public baths began to appear in Chichester. Winchester's grid-lined fortifications and timber-framed buildings date back to Nero's reign. In Silchester, the amphitheatre and the first wooden municipal square also seem to have originated from the Nero period. The only building that can be definitively completed during the reign of Agricola is the Forum Monument of Verulamium. But even then, there is no guarantee that it was built by Agricola. Because such a monument could take more than two years to build. In this light, Agricola's contribution to the Romanization of Britannia towns was not as significant as Tacitus

suggests.

The above facts show that Agricola did promote the “Romanization” of Britannia to some extent, but it was more to add to the policies of his predecessor and prepare for the subsequent governors. He did his duty, but he could not exaggerate his role, still less deny or obscure the contributions made by other Britannia Governors.

4. Discussion

In A.D. 96, the reign of Domitian was overthrown, and Rome entered a “golden age” under Nerva and Trajan, and began to regain the winds of “liberty”. As a result, many politicians in the Tumesian period were criticized, and Agricola was no exception. He reached the peak of his power under the tyrannies of emperors such as Claudius, Nero, Vespasianus, and Domitian. His death, in particular, has led to accusations that he was a smooth and weak man. In order to defend the reputation and status of Agricola, Tacitus wrote a biography to defend him, explaining his attitude towards man and tyranny, and explaining why he was not persecuted. In the Agricola, Tacitus states directly, “This book was written in defense of my father-in-law Agricola”. In the biography he repeatedly emphasizes Domitian’s jealousy of Agricola, portraying his father-in-law as modest, modest, and submissive. In addition, Tacitus used it to express his political ideals. It is not difficult to see that the biography is full of Tacitus’s criticism of the brutal and clean rule under the absolute monarchy and his admiration for the republic; It also reflects the brutal rule of the Romans over the Britannia and the dark face of Roman officialdom. In the Agricola, he wrote, “In our time, the atmosphere is so bad, the virtue is so cold.” It is full of his criticism of people’s enslavement and freedom exploitation under autocratic rule, and his attachment to the old slave-owning aristocratic republican system and the “freedom” enjoyed under the republican system.

It is important to note that the Agricola is essentially a biographical novel. Tacitus, like other historians, was inevitably influenced by the beliefs of his time. Tacitus’s biography is a blend of biography and history, introducing Agricola’s family background and career, with about two-thirds of the book describing his accomplishments as a general, military builder, and administrator in Britannia. This biography provides detailed and abundant historical materials for later scholars to study Agricola and other Roman governors of Britannia, the “Romanization” of Britannia, the customs and social conditions of Britannia; It also allows later readers to further understand the scope of Roman activities and major actions in Britannia at the end of the Flavian Era, thus providing a basic historical framework and context for in-depth study of the history of this period.

However, this work was written only a few years after Agricola’s death, and Tacitus had not seen his father-in-law for four years. Unless the work had been conceived at least ten years before publication, he would not have had the opportunity to question his father-in-law about specific events. Therefore, in the content, it is inevitable that there are errors in the record, vague expression and rhetorical exaggeration. For this problem, perhaps the combination of archaeology and other handed down

documents has become an important way out of the dilemma. There is a close connection between archaeology and historical research, and the two are intertwined. Archaeological materials, as physical relics, give us rich information and make up for the shortage of literature. The materials we find through archaeology, on the basis of critical documentary materials, try to approximate the true picture of history.

It is important to note that although the study of the figure of Agricola is based on a large amount of documentary, archaeological and epigraphic material, this is only a drop in the ocean of real history. This study is still affected by the limited archaeological evidence, and the relevant evidence needs to be supplemented.

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Note

Note 1. *Agricola* cited in this article, unless otherwise noted, is based on the English-Chinese translation of the Lobe Classical Library of Harvard University Press. The annotation follows the classical practice of listing the section in the form of a note.