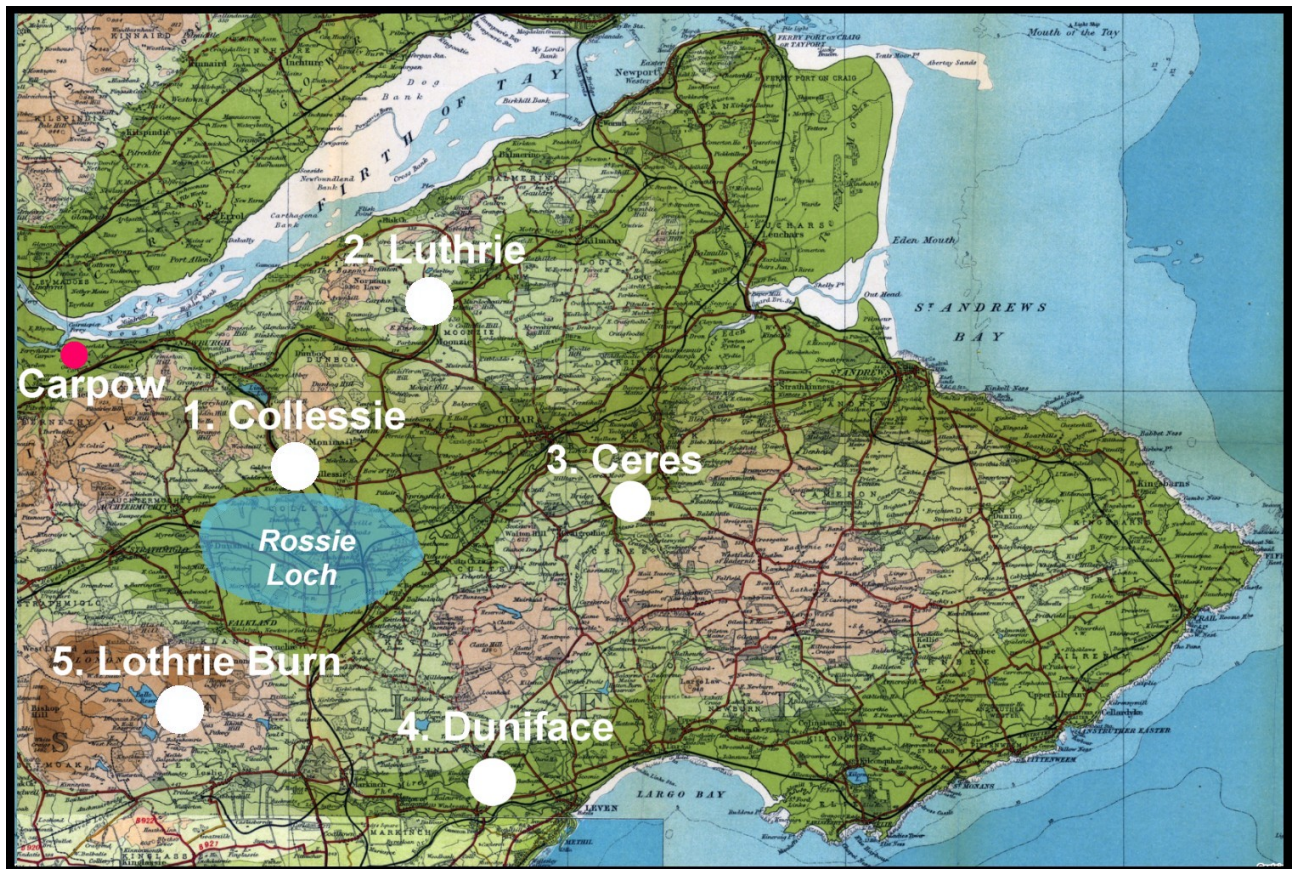


Caledonian Battles against the Fifers 212 – 230 AD

by and © Adrian C Grant 23rd July, v2 22nd August 2026

In my book “[Fife: Genesis of the Kingdom](#)” (synopsis [on this site](#)), Chapter 3 is devoted to the military strategy adopted by the Caledonians to reconquer the lands of Fife and Kinross all the way to Hoch-ma-Toch (on the northern edge of Kinghorn). [The Maeatae halted their intended further advance.]

What I had not worked out at the time of going to press was just how the strategy was implemented. It turns out that each of the four main phases of the conquest was marked by a battle. Of course I cannot account for every skirmish and I am inclined to the idea of some sort of set-piece somewhere in the East Neuk (for example just east of Largo Law), but there are four placenames which retain the record of the conflict which occurred.



base map: <https://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/#zoom=11.6&lat=56.33661&lon=-3.16270&layers=8&b=OSLeisure&o=100>

The annexation was necessary because the Romans had used Carpow as their major resupply base for their northern campaign. Denying them the opportunity of doing this again was vital, but the marvellous military landing facility offered by the huge beaches at Largo Bay (just east of Duniface above) combined with the deep water facilities at [Elie](#) (able to accommodate the largest of logistics ships) meant that nothing short of conquest all the way to Kirkcaldy was vital to the Caledonians' security against future Roman expeditions.

The reader is encouraged to use the link above to the map to explore the sites in detail.

1. Collessie.

The discussion of Collessie in “[The Place Names of Fife](#)” [PNF] comes to no firm conclusion – and rightly so because it focusses on an intended Gaelic explanation. The real solution of the etymology lies, of course in Pictish which we can access via modern Welsh.

We should parse the name Col – less – ie

Col: It is theoretically possible that this could be a reference to Cûl = hut, but there is no need for this, for **Col** = col/pass and indeed Collessie is at the mouth of the pass through the Ochil hills from Newburgh/Lindores into the Howe of Fife.

Less: All that PNF can offer is “lios”, but Welsh **Lleas** means “death/slaughter”

Ie: Long time readers will recognise this as the Pictish “**ig**” meaning “burn” which even found its way “borrowed” into Gaelic as “igh” (for which see [Dwelly](#)). Today the Lleasig is called the “Den Burn” but at that time it ran out of the pass/den and into the Rossie Loch.

So “Collessie” means the “the pass of the burn where the slaughter took place”.

Having secured the victory the Caledonians paused – and erected the Collessie Standing Stone (illustrated in my book) featuring the Caledonian Warrior both as a mark of their triumph and as a warning to Fifers to proceed no further!

It is possible that at this stage they had not committed themselves to further advance: the securing of Carpow was definitely a matter of “immediate job done”. I am confident that this phase of the campaign was over by 215.

2. Luthrie

The hills along the Tay coast of Fife are peppered with hill forts: such was the concern of the Fifers about attack from the north. Once the Caledonians had embarked on their annexation project (and, after all the land had been theirs for some 400 years before the invasion took it from them) then securing these forts was a necessity to avert flank attacks as and when they advanced south and east. Doubtless some of these forts will have been picked off one by one: Glenduckie Hill and Norman's Law would have been pre-requisites to turning inland, but so too Green Craig if they wanted to avoid attack from their rear. For this reason the Fifers will have seen them coming.

They were then able to march through the hills from Brunton to Luthrie where (I say) the Fifers were waiting for them.

Again [PNF](#) has little to say about this name, resorting to explanations based on “lothar”. I do recognise that in this case there is an intrusive “r”, much as often elsewhere we see an intrusive “t”, but my view is that we can set this to one side (on the assumption that the corruption was done by incoming Gaels (ie after 850AD) who had no interest in Pictish culture).

Thus I will parse the name Luth – (r) – ie

Ie: we have met before in this case referring to the Windygates Burn

Luth: I say that this is a corruption of Welsh “**llydd**” meaning (*inter alia*) “battle”

3. Ceres

A line of forts topped the hills to the south east of the Rossie Loch which are defended naturally from the north and west by what is tantamount to an escarpment. The idea of storming these forts from this direction would be risible. So, as I suggested in my book, the Caledonians would have approached them from the rear.

Where I was mistaken in my mind was the assumption (for want of any evidence) that the Caledonians would have laid siege to these forts. Of course I was not thinking things through from the Fifers' point of view. Being picked off in this way would have been to guarantee defeat.

The clue is in the name. Taylor and Markús in their [Place Names of Fife](#) have an extremely useful collation of old name forms but they come to no conclusion, making their best suggestion

G *siar* + Unknown -es 'Place to the west;

Sadly this is another case of Gaelocentrism. Ironically they are correct that "-es" means "place", but as Prof. Macbain made clear ("Place Names of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland" (1922) p318/9) the base, "**-ais**" and various other forms, is Pictish. So no wonder T&M were confused. This is a clue as to how to approach "Cer-" which they correctly identify as represented as "Sir-" and "Syr-" etc. in the earliest extant records. For this we need look no further than *Y Geiriadur Mawr* (a standard Welsh dictionary) to find "siâs" meaning "chase" or "battle" and, lest there be any residual doubt, "siar(r)ed" meaning "chariot" and "**siars**" meaning "charge". [See also <https://www.welsh-dictionary.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html>].

So we can now understand "Ceres" as the place where the battle charge took place – and we can suppose that in this case it was a last ditch effort by the garrisons in the forts and when that charge failed then it was all over and the Caledonians were able to establish a new front line on the hilltops with Kennoway and Leven before them.

4. Duniface

Whereas both Collessie and Luthrie are basically "out-of-the-way" places, the main complication with Duniface is its key central location. It is no accident that it is the site of an Ordnance Survey trig point. As I suggest in the book it was a key "central place" even at the time we are considering. Later it became the Viking Hall where Shakespeare's Thane of Fife lived and from which he was able to escape. A few years later Merlswain built his motte right next door. Thus we can see plenty of scope for the name developing in one or more quite distinct cultures and hence for hybridisation of the name whose meaning may well have been understood and translated.

In this regard I am pleased to see [PNF](#) starting by recognising that the start "Dun - i -" is most likely to be the Pictish "**Dyn-y-**" meaning "fort (of) the...". I even agree that Gaelic "fas" is a possible ending, as it also offers the idea of an overnight stopping place for drovers. However I think that "face" is actually a representation of the genitive of the Gaelic "**bàs**" (ie "bhàs" or some such) meaning "death".

[In Glasgow](#) some decades ago a common piece of graffiti was "Tongs ya bas" and "ya bas" on its own has been a general term of disapprobation (although, ironically, it was used by the Tongs to "mark their territory"). No-one who used this term knew what it meant or where it came from (some may have supposed that it was short for "you bastards" – but the meaning is clear ("death to the Tongs" etc.))! So it is clear that "Tongs ya bas" was first used AGAINST the Tongs and was then embraced by them (cf the Young "Mental" Gala boys of Kirkcaldy and even the term "Christian").

In short I think that Duniface means “fort of death”. But I cannot assert that this reference to death is specific to this Caledonian aggression – there being so many later occasions where the soubriquet might have been well earned.

5. Lothrie Burn

The last main task of the Caledonians was taking the hill fort at East Lomond. They started building Maiden Castle there but never finished it. I had assumed that the Fifers realised that the game was up and so surrendered. But then I came across the Lothrie Burn which actually begins [on West Lomond](#) (the link takes the reader to a relevant map) crossing the southern slopes of East Lomond to enter the Leven near Leslie House.

I suggest that there is no meaningful difference between Luthrie and Lothrie and I am pleased to see that [PNF](#) is of the same view (though it does list the very helpful form “Zothry” dating to 1390 which is redolent of the Welsh “ll”). So the conclusion I draw is that the garrison at East Lomond tried to make a run for it (aka “a strategic withdrawal”) but they were more surrounded than they had realised and so were met by the Caledonians even before they were off the hill.

Conclusion

And so it was that the Caledonians (re-)conquered Fife in time to have built their Caer-y-Caledy (aka Kirkcaldy – the fort of the Caledonians) by 230.

Hopefully by now the reader's appetite is now even further whetted to buy the book! Especially with overseas readers in mind it is available as an ebook!