

UNDERSTANDING HADRIAN'S WALL

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HADRIAN'S WALL IN THEORY: PURSUING NEW AGENDAS?

Richard Hingley

'Is RFS [Roman frontier studies] doomed always to follow reluctantly, rather than to take a full part, or even to lead in wider cross-cultural scholarship on frontiers, which the richness of its data could perhaps allow it to do?'¹

Introduction²

This short paper, which is intended to be provocative, considers an enigma – the serious and dramatic decline of research on Britain's primary Roman monument, Hadrian's Wall, in British universities. From the mid 1850s, this major frontier was the focus for a lively academic tradition of research,³ but it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that the subject appears to be moribund. Little academic research on the Wall is taking place in British universities or at academic institutions overseas, while excavations are few and far between.⁴ Important research is being conducted, for example by Tyne and Wear Museums, but the situation in universities appears terminal – the number of PhD students studying the Wall can be counted on the fingers of one hand and volumes that have been published as a result of the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference series since 1990 contain little material. In a recent summary of the archaeology of Roman Britain,⁵ references to the Wall are limited in number,⁶ suggesting a stagnation of research contrasting with the study of urbanism, rural settlement and Roman finds.⁷ The Hadrian's Wall community is aging; at a recent meeting involving around 30 scholars, I was one of the five youngest present, and I finished my PhD in 1983.

I should stress that some highly innovative work is being carried out on Roman frontiers in general terms⁸ and on the *limes*.⁹ For Hadrian's Wall there have been major advances, including the recent recognition of the defensive pits on the berm of the Wall, the excavation of the vicus and letters at Vindolanda and the collection of information as a result of the English Heritage National Mapping Programme for large-scale pre-Wall field systems; these projects provide new materials that help advances of understanding of the symbolism and context of the monument. Drawing on the *limes* work mentioned above, it is significant that an important focus has developed on the relationship

between invaders and indigenous peoples since this topic was highlighted at the 1986 Congress of Roman Frontier Studies and significant work has arisen in Britain.¹⁰ Yet, as Simon James has argued, within Britain and across Europe and North Africa, the transition to a more comparative approach to frontiers has hardly commenced,¹¹ despite the fact that the academic study of frontiers of other periods is currently a fashionable topic.¹²

It is clear to anyone with knowledge of the archaeology and history of Britain that the Wall is one of our major monuments and, as such, constitutes a considerable tourist attraction.¹³ This paper studies some of the potential reasons for the current scarcity of research on the Wall and argues that action is urgent if we are to revitalize the subject. Such a transformation requires that we revisit our research questions and the theories they encapsulate. Several new directions for study are proposed which might help to stimulate such a revolution.

Reasons for decline

From my experience of teaching at Durham University, Hadrian's Wall is a considerable attraction for undergraduate students. If first-year students are given ten essay titles about Roman Britain, including one on the history or structure of Hadrian's Wall, 80–90% are likely to choose this one. Despite this, the Wall does not appear to provide a viable focus for PhD research. One factor may explain both observations: 'we know all about Hadrian's Wall'. David Breeze¹⁴ has observed that past approaches to research and publication have tended to emphasize the extent of our knowledge and the security of our interpretations of the monument's structure and history.¹⁵ Such attitudes suggest that we already possess most of what we need to know and that there is little left to achieve; a view also expressed by many popular publications and recent TV coverage. The monument seems to be easy to interpret, secure and unchallenging, a solid foundation on which to base our ideas of the ancient past of our country; it also provides a symbol of the importance of an area of northern England ('Hadrian's Wall Country'), which sometimes appears to be marginal to the interests of national government. The substantial and prominent remains of this monument help to create a view about permanence and stability that are reflected in how we interpret it.

The Wall is a fundamental part of our national identity, used to define Englishness and Scottishness for well over

¹ James 2005, 502.

² I am very grateful to David Breeze for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

³ Birley 1961; James 2002.

⁴ For broader reflections on the state of Roman frontier studies, see James 2005.

⁵ James and Millett (eds) 2001.

⁶ Hingley 2002.

⁷ See James 2005, 501.

⁸ E.g. Whittaker 1994.

⁹ E.g. the work of Haffner and von Schnurbein (1996) and Roymans, Derks and Heeren (2007) on the interaction between indigenous communities and incomers.

¹⁰ E.g. Hunter 2007; for a review of this topic, see Hingley 2004.

¹¹ James 2005, 501.

¹² Russell 2001.

¹³ Breeze 2006; Bidwell 1999.

¹⁴ Pers. comm.

¹⁵ For an additional reason, related to the closed nature of the group who have studied the Wall, see Breeze 2003, 15.

a millennium. Its structure is substantial, well-founded and apparently predictable and easy for people to appreciate. The basis of the historical framework for its construction and use is relatively simple and relates to the history of the nation in interesting ways.¹⁶ For example, it became a major focus of interest for poets, antiquarians and historians in the late Elizabethan and Jacobean age and again in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when the unification of England and Scotland was under consideration.¹⁷ In late Victorian and Edwardian times, imperial officials and military men became fascinated by the Wall's remains, drawing upon it as a parallel for the British North-West Frontier in India.¹⁸ It became a metaphor for the limit of civilisation as Scotland was drawn into a unified 'civilised' nation. This has resulted in unfortunate imperial associations for the Wall, which has suffered from a general realignment of Roman studies toward aspects of the archaeological record that relate to the identity and agency of indigenous peoples.¹⁹ From this perspective, the details of the Wall's sequence and history appear relatively unimportant; some popular writers, visitors and many undergraduates often seem to be concerned only with its date, imperial context and supposed role as the national boundary between England and Scotland.

It is significant that some initiatives, including *Writing on the Wall*,²⁰ do demonstrate that alternative conceptions of the monument and its landscape are being articulated in the field of popular culture. There is an interesting relationship between the texts and images arising from this project and some of the directions highlighted in a recent survey of colonial frontiers of the recent past.²¹ This suggests to me that it is time for archaeologists to follow the lead of historians, geographers, novelists and artists in re-envisaging the way that we address the Roman frontiers.

The apparent understandability and solidity of the Wall account for its popularity as a topic for undergraduate essays. Every school child educated in England appears to have been taught a version of the basic 'facts' about the Wall and it is often difficult to challenge this knowledge, presumably because of its significance as part of fundamental origin myths about England, Scotland and Great Britain. Perhaps, this also explains the apparent unpopularity of the Wall among research students – the security of knowledge, together with the extent and detail of the available information, suggest that little study of real worth will be possible during a period of three years. How can a single research student contribute to such a monumental history? Is it worthwhile spending a substantial period of time contributing to a field of knowledge that is apparently so well understood and which, furthermore, seems difficult to challenge without being countered with arguments based on the very detailed knowledge of potential supervisors and examiners? The sheer amount of information impedes

the involvement of research students in researching its history and significance.

Reasons for optimism?

Hadrian's Wall specialists realize that the idea that our knowledge of the Wall is secure is a fantasy. There is so much that we do not know, as the conference at South Shields in November 2006 and discussion for the Hadrian's Wall Research Framework are currently demonstrating. Nevertheless, my observation is that, at many recent meetings, detailed evidence for the structure and sequence of the Wall appears to overwhelm attempts to construct broader or more general understandings. Attention to detail is undermining the progress of ideas. We need to focus at least some of our attention on general questions and to develop the theories and methods to explore them. This is likely to help generate a new focus of attention and research funding.

In the remainder of this paper, I suggest a number of areas that could form the basis for a new research agenda. This list is not intended in any way to be definitive or exclusive and numerous additional research questions should be generated.

Did the Wall articulate a Roman discourse of imperial identity?

Augustus' activities in broadening out Roman citizenship, together with the growing formality and definition of Roman frontiers in the first and early second centuries AD, may have led to a crisis of identity based on the issue of who was Roman and who was not.²² The introduction of provincials into the Roman senate evidently caused some concern amongst the traditional elite at Rome, but other communities in the provinces were drawn into a broadly defined Roman cultural identity through their service in the Roman auxiliary forces and their adoption of aspects of Roman ways of life.²³ The construction and character of Hadrian's Wall may relate to a need to define the limits of a hybrid and transformational Roman identity in the particular context of territory outside imperial control that was occupied by 'barbarians'.²⁴

In origin the Wall appears to be the physical expression of an imperial concept.²⁵ It defines, in monumental form, a barrier to an unstable Roman social formation. It is, as John Mann argued decades ago, a physical statement of the ending of ambition – a limit to the extent of Roman expansion. Defining and identifying the extent of the Roman province in clear physical form, it looked two ways. The construction of the Vallum meant that the fortification effectively faced both north and south, an expression of the uncertain and potentially unstable margins of imperial

¹⁶ Hingley forthcoming a.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Hingley 2000.

¹⁹ See Beard and Henderson 1999, 48.

²⁰ See www.writingonthewall.org.uk

²¹ See Russell 2001.

²² Some relevant aspects of Roman identity have recently been addressed by Dench (2005).

²³ See Hingley 2005; forthcoming b.

²⁴ For the general theoretical context, see Münkler 2007, 97 and Russell 2001.

²⁵ Mann 1990.

control. This is not to say that the Roman military could not subdue and dominate this territory through armed conflict. The frontier expressed a deeper insecurity about the present and the future, reflecting the concerns of the emperor and the imperial elite of the city of Rome.

Such a perspective draws on the growing uncertainty of imperial identity, leading to the formation of clear material barriers. This could be explored further through a study of the symbolism of the Wall in relationship to other Hadrianic building programmes across the empire. Why was the frontier of Britannia so substantial compared to imperial barriers elsewhere? How does it relate to urban building programmes in Rome and provincial cities?"

How did experiences on Hadrian's Wall relate to life on other frontiers

By comparing Hadrian's Wall with other frontiers in Europe, Africa, the Near East and Australasia, we can explore their contrasts and similarities. Issues of significance in the context of Hadrian's Wall include the reasons behind its considerable scale and apparent formality. Many frontiers in the modern world are not marked by distinct physical features; does the character of the Wall relate to the ideas held by the Romans of Britain as a special locale,²⁶ that it was a particularly barbaric, marginal and dangerous place? Is it a response to particular imperial needs or to the situation on the ground? Can we build on David Mattingly's approach to 'discrepant experiences' in order to study the lives of different peoples on the Wall and the contrasts between various Roman frontiers?²⁷

There is a growing fixation on frontiers, borderlands and physical frontier boundaries at present; including, for example, writings on the Great Wall of China, the wall forced on the Palestinians by the Israelis,²⁸ the USA-Mexico Border²⁹ and the Mediterranean Sea between Africa and Spain.³⁰ All these examples provide potential parallels and contrasts to the Roman's experience of their northern frontier, study which has value from an international, cross-disciplinary perspective.³¹

How did the Wall draw upon pre-existing landscapes and how did its presence influence the experiences of various constituencies?

The Romans did not impose their imperial system on a blank canvas. People had lived and died across northern Britain for many millennia before the Romans forced their presence onto the landscape. Roman military action and infrastructure responded to the people that they experienced in the landscapes that they colonized.³² Perhaps we should seek to make the Wall strange through our study,

as Richard Bradley has recently argued for the study of Neolithic monuments.³³ The Romans were not entirely like us and a focus on the difference and incomprehensibility of the Wall will help to make new work challenging and significant.

The examination of the cultural history of the landscapes that were transformed through the construction and manning of the Wall – the ritual places, the areas of occupation and cultivation and lines of communication – may help us to understand the location in which the Wall was built and its form.³⁴ The choices made on the ground by those who constructed the frontier are likely to have responded to the past history of activity in the landscapes colonized by the military fortifications.

The construction of the Wall will also have fundamentally influenced the people who lived around it and manned it. Indigenous people will have experienced new ways of life occurring in this landscape,³⁵ although it would be interesting to know how close they were permitted to come to the soldiers. When they passed through the monument through a gateway, how were their movements controlled? They were presumably superintended, but could they access and observe the interiors of forts and fortlets and, if so, how did they react to what they witnessed of the physical form or these places and the lives of the soldiers that went on there? The auxiliary soldiers will also have been challenged by the new requirements of life on the Wall, manipulating their identities to explore the new opportunities. A major focus for research could involve a study of the physical nature of the monument and the ways that this responded to and influenced those who lived in and around it. The location of gateways and how these may or may not have responded to previous occupation, ritual places and lines of communication is relevant here.³⁶

Why did the Wall survive so long? If it was a response to a particular imperial situation, why was it maintained and used for several centuries? Were its meanings and functions transformed during the time it was occupied and adapted? Does its later history help to explain the reason for its initial construction, or was its role entirely redefined during the course of the three centuries in which it appears to have been in use?

What has the Wall meant to later populations?

The meaning of the Wall and its landscape from the eighth century to the present is the subject of a new project with substantial Arts and Humanities Research Council funding which is under my direction and is titled *Tales of the Frontier*.³⁷ My colleagues for this project are Dr Divya Tolia-Kelly, Dr Rob Witcher and Dr Claire Nesbitt. The ways in which we view and interpret the Wall influence our

²⁶ Clarke 2001; Evans 2003.

²⁷ Mattingly 1997; 2004; 2006.

²⁸ Gregory 2004, 95-101.

²⁹ Juffer (ed.) 2006.

³⁰ Mazanas Calvo 2006.

³¹ James 2005, 502.

³² Hingley 2004.

³³ Bradley forthcoming.

³⁴ See Russell 2001 for a discussion of the potential impact of indigenous ritual on frontier societies.

³⁵ James 2001.

³⁶ Hodgson 2005, 183-8.

³⁷ For a summary of the project see www.dur.ac.uk/roman-centre/hadrianswall

questions, what we choose to notice, record and publish. Relevant topics studied by this new project, include the use of the Wall in defining ideas of English, Scottish and British imperial identity,³⁸ together with the scholarship of Wall studies.³⁹

Revitalizing study of the Wall

If we have the confidence to explore these general questions, research on the Wall should be revitalized, attracting a variety of new researchers and helping to transform studies. If, however, we continue the current approaches of making modest contributions to an apparently easily comprehensible topic, it is difficult to see from where the next generation of Wall scholars will come.

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³⁸ Also addressed, in brief, in Hingley 2000 and Hingley forthcoming a.

³⁹ Which will build on Birley 1961.