

Chapter 2

The Archaeology, History and Significance of Hadrian's Wall

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Hadrian's Wall is neither the longest section of the Roman imperial frontier, nor necessarily the best surviving; but it is perhaps the most well known. Its building was recorded in antiquity: "Hadrian was the first to build a wall from sea to sea, 80 miles long, to separate the Romans and the barbarians" (*Historia Augusta, Life of Hadrian*, 11, 2). This was in the AD 120s. Soon, souvenirs were being produced for the frontier, small pans, perhaps associated with drinking parties, decorated with depictions of the Wall and the names of its forts (Breeze 2012). The Wall remained the frontier of Roman Britain for nearly 300 years, but with the short break of a generation when the Antonine Wall in Scotland was occupied.

Accurate information about the building of Hadrian's Wall was soon lost following the end of Roman Britain about AD 410 and myths were created about the reasons for its construction; but it was not forgotten and was recorded by the medieval chroniclers and plotted on maps. The advent of the printing press in the West brought the classical authors to a wider audience and the start of a more informed approach. Visitors came to the Wall, notably William Camden, author of *Britannia*, an account of the history and antiquities of Britain, in the reign of Elizabeth I, and the surviving remains were recorded. The eighteenth century witnessed the detailed recording and analysis of the surviving remains, the nineteenth century the start of archaeological investigation. These labours have resulted in Hadrian's Wall being the most explored Roman frontier with an enormous archaeological database of information which continues to be enhanced through survey and excavation as well as research in the study. Even so, less than 5 % of the Wall has been subject to detailed examination through excavation.

The main outline of the initial building history of Hadrian's Wall is well known. There were two principal phases. The first consisting of the linear barrier, that is, a stone or turf wall, with a ditch, a fortlet (milecastle) at every mile and two towers (turrets) in between. The fortlets and towers continued for about 40 km down the

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Fig. 2.1 Aerial photograph of the fort at Maryport—part of the Cumbrian coastal frontier section of the WHS. (Copyright: Senhouse Trust)



Cumbrian coast beyond the west end of the Wall at Bowness-on-Solway. Before this scheme was completed, a decision was made to build forts on the Wall. This necessitated the abandoning of about 15 forts in northern England and Wales and the building of forts at intervals of about 11 km along the Wall and down the Cumbrian coast (Fig. 2.1). Uniquely, most forts were placed astride the Wall and furnished with additional gates, both presumably to improve the mobility of the army. The Stone Wall was then reduced in thickness and the level of craftsmanship reduced, presumably in an attempt to speed the building work. One final element was the Vallum, a great earthwork, 120 Roman feet (40 m), across and consisting of a ditch with a mound setback equidistant on each side. It was placed south of the Wall and diverged round the forts; hence, its construction followed the decision to place forts on the Wall line. It could only be crossed at causeways outside forts and in this way the number of points at which travellers could pass through the Wall was reduced from about 82 to 16 suggesting a concern with control of movement. The process of building all the elements of Hadrian's Wall took at least six years and possibly twice as long.

After Hadrian's death in AD 138, his successor Antoninus Pius abandoned the Wall and ordered the construction of a new frontier, the Antonine Wall, on the Forth–Clyde isthmus, but this only lasted a generation before being abandoned in its turn;

Hadrian's Wall remained the north-west frontier of the Roman Empire until the end of Roman rule in Britain in the early fifth century.

On return of the army from the Antonine Wall, Hadrian's Wall seems to have been commissioned as before. The Vallum was brought back into use, forts, milecastles and turrets reoccupied. Changes soon occurred. There had been no road in the first plan, now one was built, the Military Way, which ran parallel to the Wall on its southern side. In the later second century, many turrets in the central sector and elsewhere were abandoned, while several milecastles had their north gates narrowed, and it was probably at this time that most causeways across the ditch in front of the milecastles were removed. The Vallum fell out of use and civilians were allowed to build their houses closer to the fort walls. Indeed, some of these settlements grew to be larger than the forts themselves. The fort buildings were amended, new styles of barrack blocks introduced, and troop numbers increased and then decreased. Several civil settlements appear to have been abandoned towards the end of the third century, though we do not know where their inhabitants went. At times, the Wall itself fell into disrepair and then had to be repaired.

This sketch of the building and history might imply that we know all that there is to know about Hadrian's Wall; this would be a false impression. There are many aspects where our knowledge is woefully inadequate. Hadrian's Wall did not spring completely into existence. It was built in relation to an existing line of forts, fortlets and towers across the Tyne–Solway isthmus, but we need to know more about these antecedents. The turf sector, that is, the western 48 km (30 miles) of the Wall, is badly understood. There has been little excavation there since the 1930s, yet, what work has been done since then has challenged our basic beliefs. Excavations across the Vallum have revealed significant contradictions in its construction and use, which need to be resolved. Knowledge of the development of forts may be piecemeal, but there has been only one extensive modern excavation of a civil settlement, at Vindolanda. Now, however, we appreciate that we have a major resource through the many geophysical surveys of civil settlements along the Wall and on the Cumbrian coast. These have revealed not only buildings but also housing plots, internal and external ditches and relationships with the landscape beyond. Within that landscape also are cemeteries, an almost completely unexplored element of Hadrian's Wall.

The most remarkable development of recent years has been the discovery of writing tablets at Vindolanda and Carlisle. These not only illuminate life on the northern frontier but also allow the more extensive range of documents found in the Eastern provinces to be used with confidence to illustrate life in Britain. Such documents are only found by chance. The second major development has been dendrochronology that has allowed us to date precisely timbers used in fort construction; here knowledge will advance through excavation. Soon it will be necessary to explore the extensive civil settlements discovered through geophysical survey. But in the meantime more survey should be undertaken—at every fort and its civil settlement along the Wall, at milecastles, as work at Milecastle 73 has revealed activity outside the military enclosure, and at turrets, where there are already hints of external activities. Yet, remarkably, the visible remains have more secrets to reveal as the survey work of Humphrey Welfare (2000, 2004) has demonstrated. We still do not have a published survey of Hadrian's Wall.

Fig. 2.2 Visitors being shown the plaque marking the eastern end of the Wall.
(Copyright: Hadrian's Wall Trust)



The steady accumulation of information, in particular through excavation over the last 120 years, has resulted in a vast archaeological database. Interpretation and theories have been offered, amended and abandoned. The process of analysis and re-analysis continues and must continue for few problems which can be considered to have been solved. These problems start with the identification of the various individual parts of the frontier; it is far too readily believed that we know everything about the route of the Wall and its structures. Yet, particularly in the western sector of the Wall and the Cumbrian coast, we have too few basic details.

Hadrian's Wall deserves such work not least because of its unique nature. Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall have the distinction of being the only frontiers where most of the individual elements are linked, linear barrier, forts (with civil settlements), fortlets and towers; Hadrian's Wall has an advantage through having a longer life so that the development of individual aspects can be investigated. Yet, there are whole periods of its history where our knowledge is very slight, and in particular the third century. We have very little idea of how the Wall was maintained during these decades and in the fourth century, and of how it declined after the end of Roman Britain. On Hadrian's Wall we can study not just life on the edge of empire but how that life was sustained both locally and through long-range supply and over time. We can explore the ethnicity of soldiers and civilians, and the relationship between those living on the Wall and the surrounding population and the relationship of soldier and civilian, urban dweller and rural countryman to the landscape. We need to study industry—metal working, pottery production, quarrying and the production of souvenirs—in the Wall zone. All these activities occurred within a wider environment, yet we know little of the relationship between urban centres and the surrounding countryside. Nor do we fully understand how military deployment in the northern frontier zone, which stretched as far south as York and Chester, worked.

There is a further, most important, aspect to Hadrian's Wall, its role as a tourist attraction (Fig. 2.2). The requirements of presentation and interpretation could so easily clash with the necessity to protect and manage the archaeological remains; nowhere are these issues more acute than along the National Trail, much of which

lies on the monument. In today's world, the former could be viewed as having priority over the latter. Yet unless the monument is preserved and conserved there might, in time, be insufficient archaeological evidence for visitors to see, nor for archaeologists to study; as Richard Hingley (2012) has emphasised, archaeologists must be interested in the management of Hadrian's Wall.

In the face of this potential clash, the research strategy, *Frontiers of Knowledge, A Research Framework for Hadrian's Wall*, has an important role to play (Symonds and Mason 2009). Its authors examine the state of knowledge of Hadrian's Wall and explore the primary research themes, thus helping to prioritise the various proposals, an important task in these days of diminishing resources. The gathering of archaeological information is balanced in part by the collection of information pertinent to management issues, most notably in connection with the National Trail. In such ways, the different elements of this extensive and complicated World Heritage Site can be related to each other and appropriate management decisions taken.

The sum of the parts helps us to understand the function of Hadrian's Wall and how it has changed over the centuries. Continuing archaeological investigations will lead to a greater understanding of the frontier. An improved integration of archaeological aspirations with tourism and management requirements will lead to a more secure future of one of the world's greatest monuments, the physical manifestation of one of the world's greatest empires and the care it took to protect its people.

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Managing, Using, and Interpreting Hadrian's Wall as
World Heritage

Stone, P.; Brough, D. (Eds.)

2014, XII, 139 p. 30 illus. in color., Softcover

ISBN: 978-1-4614-9350-1