JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

21/2026

www.thersites-journal.de

Imprint

Universitätsverlag Potsdam 2026
http://verlag.ub.uni-potsdam.de | https://ror.org/01femje42
Email: verlag@uni-potsdam.de
https://www.thersites-journal.de/

ISSN 2364-7612

Contact
Principal Contact
Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink
Historisches Institut, Professur Geschichte des Altertums
Am Neuen Palais 10, 14469 Potsdam (Germany)
Email: thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de
Support Contact
PD Dr. Christian Rollinger
Email: thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de

Layout and Typesetting
text plus form, Dresden

Cover pictures:
Left: Hadrian's Wall, quisnovus (flickr.com). CC-BY 2.0
Right: Interior of Teatro Olimpico (Vicenza) scena, Didier Descouens (wikipedia.org). CC-BY-SA 4.0

Published online at:
https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol21

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

21/2026 | pp. 1–33

FEDERICO SANTANGELO
(Università di Genova, Italy)

Hadrian's Wall, 1850–1950: Frontier and Monument

Abstract This paper discusses the place of Hadrian's Wall in British intellectual life between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, and charts its development through three key phases: the new season of archaeological and antiquarian research spearheaded by John Collingwood Bruce; the ground-breaking methodological reflections of Francis Haverfield and R. G. Collingwood; and the debates on the Wall as an ancient and modern frontier, from Rudyard Kipling to Winston Churchill and W. H. Auden. The Appendix reproduces an important 1921 paper by R. G. Collingwood that is virtually inaccessible outside the United Kingdom.

Keywords Hadrian's Wall; Roman Empire; frontiers; British Empire; Roman Britain

URL https://thersites-journal.de
DOI https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol21.304

1. A VICTORIAN REDISCOVERY

The wall that used to run across Northern England for 74 miles, from Bowness to Wallsend, came to be firmly recognised as Hadrian's Wall only in the mid-nineteenth century. The presence of a Roman wall in those parts had of course long been acknowledged and had been the object of careful and often passionate study for centuries. For generations, though, the Wall had been regarded as either from a later phase of Roman imperial history – typically the Severan period – or even as non-Roman at all: in the 1570s the local antiquarian Christopher Ridley claimed that it had been built by the Picts, the native population that engaged in a longstanding resistance against the Roman invasion.[1] Far from being a mark of Rome's civilising mission, it was a token of enduring alterity. Throughout the early modern period the Wall was often referred to as the "Picts' Wall". From the second quarter of the eighteenth century, though, it was customarily called the "Roman Wall", and in the nineteenth century new methods of investigation and a new body of evidence decisively steered the consensus towards a dating at the end of the first quarter of the second century CE.[2]

From the early Victorian age, the Wall was associated with a turning point in the Roman conquest of Britain, and with a specific phase in the history of the Roman Empire. Engagement with it in this period was marked by at least three original features, which have been identified in a number of later studies, most notably in Richard Hingley's 2012 book on the "life" of the Wall.[3] Firstly, the leading role in the study of the Wall was not played by university professors, but by a cohort of scholars who brought to the topic a robust antiquarian training, and operated within the context of local learned society, especially in North East England. Secondly, the Wall rarely featured in the political debate of the time: a search through the Hansard – the transcripts of parliamentary debates at Westminster – shows that reference to it is hardly ever made in the context of political arguments, and that the focus of the attention is on its preservation and the promotion of its legacy. As we shall see in some detail, though, references to the Wall in literature and popular culture are often politically charged. Thirdly,

1 Birley (1961), 2–4.

2 On the distinction between *murus* and *vallum,* and that between 'wall' and 'ditch' in this context, see Collingwood 1930, 69 n. 1. https://archive.org/details/archaeologyofrom0000rgco/page/68/mode/2up

3 Hingley (2012), 177–253. See also Hingley (2008), 85–155.

the Wall is a boundary for which no direct geopolitical or strategic significance can be invoked in modern times: the historical significance that it had in antiquity, though, is made to yield lessons that retain considerable contemporary value. In the background there are of course three wider problems: the continuity between Britannia and Britain; the complex analogies between Roman and British Empire, and, further in the background, the relationship between England and Scotland.

As R. G. Collingwood argued in a classic paper to which we shall return, Hadrian's Wall is not just a monument, or a topic: it is a problem, and one whose methodological implications are as considerable as the substantive ones. Figuring out *how* to study the Wall is just as significant as coming up with a credible reconstruction of its chronology and its archaeology. The work of the founding figure of the modern study of the Wall, John Collingwood Bruce (1805–1892), articulates this fundamental interdependence. His 1851 book, *The Roman Wall,* opens with an evocation of the wall as a boundary: "The Roman Wall, which, in former times, protected southern Britain from the ravages of the northern tribes, exhibits, at this day, remains more entire, and forms a subject of study more interesting than is generally supposed".[4] Bruce's treatment is based on thorough familiarity with the material remains of the wall, and asserts their significance in strongly assured terms: Britain is the country in which the traces of the presence of the Roman army are most prominent, and its unique bond with Rome is embodied by the Wall: "As this work, in grandeur of conception, is worthy of the Mistress of Nations, so, in durability of structure, is it the becoming offspring of the Eternal City".[5] The continuity is profound, but imperfect. Hadrian is confidently identified as the author of the wall and as a great military leader, but not even his intervention resolved the long-standing threat posed by the northern populations: the history of the Roman presence in northern England is in fact "fraught with disaster"; the problem was a long-term one, though, and not resolved until the reign of Elizabeth I. Not even Roman military discipline and the moral instruction conferred by the liberal arts could equip the Britons with the skill and resolve to stand up to the attacks of the Picts and the Scots. The Wall was there to be maintained as a barrier, and its demise is a development worthy

4 Bruce (1851), v.

5 Bruce (1851), 1. On this passage see Hingley (2008), 309–310. For a recent biographical profile of Collingwood, based on a survey of his surviving portraits, see Lovell Stewart-Breeze-Wilson (2024). See also Breeze (2024), 8–17.

of investigation, especially from the standpoint of imperial Britain. The question whether the fate of Persia, Macedon, and Rome might befall upon it remains open, although the new empire can rely on the guidance of the Bible, and thus save itself from the same vicious cycle.

Bruce had trained as a Presbyterian minister, and such a providential take on history is not altogether surprising. Nor was such a keen religious outlook a hurdle to his curiosity: far from it, it appeared to give it further vigour. In June 1849, as he was working on his book, he organised a walk along the Wall that was to become the first instalment of an honourable tradition which continues to this day: significantly, it was called the Hadrian's Wall Pilgrimage.[6] It was a local event, but it was going to have considerable implications for the later history of scholarship on the Wall, and was rather fundamentally connected to the recent developments on the big stage of European political history: in the summer of the previous year Bruce had planned a trip to Rome, but (in the words of his son Gainsford) "was prevented by the revolutions which convulsed nearly the whole of Europe at the time, and therefore he resolved to study the Roman remains in the north of England".[7] When the group of the pilgrims visited Housesteads, Bruce was asked to give a talk on the mysteries of Mithras ("This I did as well as I could"); in his address he also commented on the "downtrodden state" of Britain at the time when the site was built, and added that things had changed comprehensively: Queen Victoria ruled over "regions Caesar never knew", and over four times the number of subjects that "great Julius" used to govern.[8] The Pilgrimage involved about twenty participants, but various "gentry" from Newcastle and from the centres near the Wall joined it at various points. It was Bruce's stated ambition to elicit respect towards it among the inhabitants of the region, which had often used it as a quarry, by showing that "gentlemen of education and cultivated ladies" were taking an interest in it. Class boundaries, as ever in English history, come into the equation.

6 On which see Breeze (2020). – On the logistics of study trips on the Wall in the 1930s see Anonymous (1932); Bridge (1932); Garnons Williams (1935), 130–131. By the start of the century the Wall had gained a place of some significance in English travel literature: see Hoyer (1908) and Weigall (1926).

7 Bruce (1905), 110.

8 Bruce (1905), 121.

2. CANONISING THE WALL: BRUCE'S SCHOLARLY LEGACY

Bruce's work readily gained attention and credibility. His argument on the chronology of the Wall, which attributed to Hadrian both the construction of the wall and the earthen rampart along it, was accepted by Thomas Wright (1810–1877) in his large-scale account of British history *The Celt, the Roman and the Saxon* (1852), where the project was explained in light of a wider "system of circumvallation" that Hadrian set up for the northern frontier of the Empire; later history is used to stress how valuable the creation of a barrier against "the ravages of the Scots" could be.[9] On this account, the Wall fulfilled its defensive mission down to the end. Even after the end of Roman rule, in the fifth century, the Picts did not invade the former province by climbing the wall, but through the Solway Firth, having joined forces with the Irish (386). This is not the only instance in which the theme of an alliance between the Scots and the Irish was invoked, as we shall see. Charles Merivale (1808–1893), the distinguished author of *A History of the Romans under the Empire,* also had some positive comments on Bruce's contribution in the eighth and final volume of his great work (1865). Even though he was unpersuaded by the Hadrianic dating, and was rather inclined to date "the stupendous wall of solid masonry" to the age of Theodosius and Stilicho, he still credited Hadrian with the decision to draw the northern frontier of the province between the Solway and the Tyne, thus creating an effective barrier against the Caledonians. But there was more: in the archaeology of that small portion of territory one can "read an epitome" of the history of the Roman Empire (210); at the same time, in the Antonine period the area north of the Wall also got "filled with monuments of southern civilization", and the expansion of the boundaries of the empire was partly driven by the provincial themselves, who were keen to escape the direct control of provincial government ("the pressure of their local burdens"), but also wanted to keep enjoying its protection. Like Bruce, Merivale granted the archaeology of Roman Britain a special role in the understanding of the Roman world, and played on the stimulating paradox that the fringes of the empire represent its deepest spirit.

Merivale was also keen to stress the ethnic diversity of the imperial operation, and vividly portrayed the range of populations that defended the frontier against the Caledonians. The same idea features – quite independently – in a mural that in 1857 the Pre-Raphaelite Scottish artist William Bell Scott (1811–1890) placed

9 Wright (1852), 99–100.

at the start of a cycle of eight paintings on the history of Northumberland, in the Central Hall of Wallington, a stately home then owned by the Trevelyans. The scene has a somewhat incongruous touch to it: the wall is being built under the watch of a centurion that proudly stands by the SPQR standard, while some Roman soldiers are busy seeing off an attack from the north. Some of its features, though, are highly consequential. One of the Roman soldiers, prominently placed right at the front of the defence line, with an enemy arrow in his shield, is a black man, in a studied nod at the multiethnic dimension of the empire.[10] The centurion at the forefront, sternly looking at what appears to be a family of Britons that are failing to pull their weight in the wall-building project, has the features of John Clayton (1792–1890), the Town Clerk of Newcastle upon Tyne who played a crucial role in safeguarding stretches of the Wall and overseeing their restoration, and to whom Bruce's 1851 book is dedicated; the workman right behind him, keenly scanning the horizon, is none other than Bruce himself. The painting has an avowedly local dimension, as it is intended to depict the opening act of civilisation in the North East. The key trait it shares with the seven other paintings of the cycle is its connection with labour and technology; the red-lettered inscription that tops it unequivocally summarises the importance of the event to Scott and his commissioners, slightly paraphrasing a passage of the *Historia Augusta* (*Hadr.* 11.2): *Adrianus murum duxit qui barbaros Romanosque divideret*. Significantly, a clear line of continuity is posited between ancient and modern: the construction of the Wall is identified as a defining moment in the history of Northumberland and, more broadly, of Britain itself.[11] **(Figure 1)**

The Wallington mural is the exceptional manifestation of a process that unfolded well beyond the sheltered confines of a stately home, and was definitely not restricted to the aristocracy. The second half of the nineteenth century is the moment in which the Roman Wall became an established feature of the landscape of Northern England, and the prospect of walking along it and getting to know it in any detail turned into a realistic one; the challenge of its protection was intrinsically linked to the wider challenge of managing the change that the industrial revolution was bringing about. Some learned societies played a central role in disseminating such knowledge and awareness. In Northern England, the Society of Antiquaries and the Literary and Philosophical Society in Newcastle, and the Cumberland and Westmoreland Antiquarian and Archaeological

10 For a careful reading of this painting see Symonds (2021), 158–160.

11 See Figure 1.

Figure 1 William Bell Scott, *The Romans Cause a Wall to Be Built for the Protection of the South*, 1857, Wallington Hall, Northumberland. Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Clayton_painting.jpg

Association (founded in 1866); on the national stage, the Society of Antiquaries of London. Bruce was the central figure in this season, and it was befitting that in 1886, when the Second Pilgrimage was jointly organised by the Newcastle and Cumberland Societies, he should be appointed "chief pilgrim and expounder general": he was eighty at the time.[12] In the speech he gave at the start of the Pilgrimage he restated the analogy between Rome and Britain, and the need "to avoid those faults, those sins which have laid this mighty people in the dust".[13]

The party included E. C. Clark, Regius Professor of Civil Law at Cambridge, and the Dutch archaeologist Gerrit A. Hulsebos from Utrecht: the Wall had by then established itself as a topic whose attraction well exceeded its local remit. In the previous year, in *Die Provinzen von Caesar bis Diocletian,* Theodor Mommsen had defined it the best known of Roman military works:[14] his assessment was both a reflection of the importance of the material and of the quality of the work that had been done on it. It was also the symptom, though, of an emerging interest in the Roman frontier in other provincial contexts, notably in Germany. That work would soon lead to a radical rescoping of the investigations carried out in Northern England. It required a shift from the surveys that Bruce had been conducting, and from the conservation effort that Clayton had promoted, as well as the careful gathering of the material that had already come to light, and involved new, ambitious, and costly excavation campaigns, comparable to those that had been carried out in Southern England. It also required new institutional conditions, and new convergences and synergies between antiquarian societies and universities.[15]

12 See Bruce (1905), 164–166.

13 See the summary of the speech in *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society* (1887), 124–125, with the comments in Tolia-Kelly 2011, 75–76. The same sentiment may be found in Robert White's 1867 poem *To a Friend: on Visiting the Roman Wall,* which also features a reference to Gibbon (quoted in Hingley 2012, 154).

14 Mommsen (1885), 169.

15 Birley (1961), 64–69 remains the most effective discussion of that transformational phase. The need for sustained collaboration between universities and learned societies is strongly stated at the end of Haverfield's inaugural address to the AGM of the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies: Haverfield (1911), xix–xx.

3. FRANCIS HAVERFIELD'S REAPPRAISAL OF THE WALL

A key figure in that new development was an Oxford ancient historian, Francis Haverfield (1860–1919), who had worked under Mommsen in the 1880s.[16] In a note he published in the *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society,* he remarked that within the space of a decade a considerable gap had emerged between the work conducted on the German *limes* and that on the Wall: the fundamental difference was that the extent of the archaeological investigation conducted in Northern England was inadequate: "The spade was rarely used to prove theories which were suggested by the appearance of the ground".[17] Haverfield made a strong case for a change of approach and for the rewards it could yield. A key problem to explore was the relationship between the Wall and the Vallum, the earthwork that runs roughly parallel to it on the southern side. Haverfield earnestly critiques the work of Bruce and his predecessors, and denies that the Vallum had any military function; it was a "ditch between mounds", probably contemporary to the Wall, which it intentionally avoids, and serving as a "civil or legal delimitation".[18] The differentiation between military and legal functions was a new idea, which is directly linked to the definition of a new working principle, whereby "the spade alone can resolve the puzzle".[19]

This distinctive combination of big questions and firm engagement with detail is a major aspect of the contribution of Haverfield to the field, and is apparent in his best-known study, the short book *The Romanization of Roman Britain,* based on a 1905 British Academy lecture, in which the concept of "Romanization" – by then well embedded in other scholarly traditions – was first used in English-speaking historiography as the pivot of a sustained argument.[20] Haverfield took issue with the widespread assumption that the Romans and Britons were as different from one another as the modern Englishman and the Indian, and that

16 See Freeman (2007) for a formidably rich discussion of Haverfield's life and work: see esp. 123–140, 153–164, on the connection with Mommsen.

17 Haverfield 1899, 337. On the significance of this intervention and its background see Browning (1991), 355–357 and Freeman (2007), 269–270.

18 Haverfield (1899), 342. This possibility is still entertained in Collingwood and Myres (1937), 124.

19 Haverfield (1899), 343.

20 Haverfield (1905). On its usage see Hingley (2008), 315–319 and Lambert (2024), 30–35.

Roman civilisation had virtually no impact on the province, leaving "the natives almost as Celtic as their coming had found them nearly four hundred years before".[21] He instead sought to complicate that picture by identifying a fundamental difference between southern Britain, where there is a relatively strong and complex network of urban centres, and the north, which was occupied by troops. The extent and quality of Romanization thus varied considerably within the province itself. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the Wall and the Vallum should have a rather marginal role in Haverfield's big-picture account.

They did receive a fuller discussion in the 1907 Ford Lectures on the occupation of Britain, which were published posthumously and are arguably the most powerful testimony to the importance of Haverfield's scholarship.[22] The Wall is envisaged as a stage in the military conquest of the island: not as a final step, but as one that was never reversed: the frontier was never south of it, and the "northern tribes" were "barred… from their southern kinsmen" (119). Haverfield first envisaged a two-stage process, in which Hadrian first built a sod wall, which lasted roughly ninety years, and was replaced by a stone wall built by Septimius Severus; later discoveries persuaded him that the latter was in fact earlier. Three points of general importance are worth stressing for our purposes: Haverfield's view that the Wall had a plain defensive purpose, and served it until the end of Roman rule in Britain, unlike the Antonine Wall, which fell to the Caledonians four decades after its construction;[23] that it was not intended as "the final limit of Roman occupation"; and that sustained collaboration among, and investment from, different institutions were needed to further its understanding.

4. DEFENSIVE READINGS AND COLONIAL ANALOGIES

The emphasis that Haverfield placed on the defensive function of the Wall chimes with other contemporary responses to it, and it is tempting to link it with wider political and social anxieties. In an important essay in which he set

21 Haverfield (1924), 23.

22 See Freeman (2007), 482–484.

23 The Antonine Wall was occasionally referred to as a frontier of civilisation: see e.g. R. Stevenson's *The Wrecker* (1892), where an analogy with the North American West Coast is entertained (discussed in Malamud [2010], 249–250).

out to compare and contrast imperial Rome and the British Empire, Sir Charles Lucas (1853–1931) – a distinguished civil servant in the colonial administration – established a "rough analogy" between the Roman Wall and the northern frontier of India: they were both intended to "obstruct coming and going", giving "security to the enclosed area", and at the same time acting as a "preserve for barbarism outside it".[24] The analogy, though, goes to show the fundamental difference between the Roman and British imperial projects: while Rome is keen to draw limits, Britain trade and colonization tend to have none. A decade earlier, in 1901, James Bryce (1838–1922) had given a similar assessment in his comparative discussion of the Roman and British empires, stressing the contrast between the attempt to create a "scientific frontier" in Hadrian's time and the ability of the British, who could afford to fortify only a small number of sites.[25] In a wide-ranging essay on frontiers, the former Viceroy of India and Chancellor of Oxford University Lord George Curzon (1859–1925) took a somewhat different line. In his view, the key function of Hadrian's Wall was to protect the province, rather than delimiting it: it also serves as a tool to control the movements across the boundary ("more a line of trespass than a Frontier"). It fulfilled its function well for centuries, until the pressure of the "ever-mounting crest of the barbarian torrent" became impossible to harness. An analogy from the ongoing colonial experience can prove fruitful: the Roman Wall may fairly be compared with the Customs Hedge in northern India, established by the British in 1843, and stretching almost 2,500 miles.[26]

This set of concerns take a striking visual form in a painting by the Tynemouth-born artist Robert Spence (1871–1964), made between 1912 and 1914, *The Night Attack,* and now owned by the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle, which depicts an attack of the Caledonians on the fort of Housesteads. The viewpoint is squarely internal to the Roman camp, and neatly captures the moment when the assailants break the gate open; the order of the Roman camp is about to be undone.[27] Other portions of the Wall, in the distance, are on fire. The sentiment

24 Lucas (1912), 61–62. See Hingley (2000), 45.

25 Bryce (1914), 18–19. Desideri (1991), 612–616 remains invaluable on the wider historiographical significance of Bryce's project.

26 Curzon (1908), 23–26. See Hingley (2000), 41–42, 44–45. The Italian edition by A. Zarlenga (Curzon [2022]) offers a very helpful introduction. For a recent discussion of the projects of Lucas and Curzon see Lambert (2024), 18–25.

27 See Hingley (2000), 48 for a reasonably good image of the painting.

could hardly be further away from that of the Wallington mural. Yet the scene does not depict the collapse of Roman rule in Britain, or the demise of the Wall: as the full title of the painting makes clear, Spence placed the attack "during the second century". Whatever the might of the attackers, order will be restored. **(Figure 2)**

In the previous year, the Oxford historian Charles R. L. Fletcher (1857–1934) and the distinguished writer Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) published a *History of England* "written for all boys and girls who are interested in the story of Great Britain and her Empire", as the preface states.[28] The main text was written by Fletcher, while the poems that are interspersed through the narrative are Kipling's work; the discussion is accompanied and reinforced by illustrations by Henry Ford. The work takes the widest possible chronological compass, and the opening chapter discusses the period from the earliest times to the departure of the Romans. The brutal aspects of the Roman conquest are not glossed over, especially in the aftermath of the Boudicca revolt, but its effects are judged in unreservedly positive terms: "such peace and good government as Britain had never seen before" (15). The Roman imperial project had only one crucial shortcoming: it did not stretch far enough. Rome failed to conquer the whole island. Agricola did invade Scotland, but did not leave "traces of civilization behind him", and Ireland was not touched at all. Fletcher's language has rightly been denounced as xenophobic: "Ireland never went to school, and has been a spoilt child ever since".[29] The construction of Hadrian's Wall marks and defends the "Scottish frontier", and separates the province from the Celts to the North, "almost untouched, certainly unsubdued".[30] Roman Britain has a history of prosperity, which bears the germs of complacency and decline: it "went to sleep behind her walls". The process is hastened by the distraction and incompetence of the Roman authorities, and is a symptom of a wider crisis of the Empire. For Britain, though, the consequences are especially grave: it faces pressure from the Picts at the North, from the Celtic Scots from Ireland, and from "Englishmen and

28 Fletcher and Kipling (1911).

29 The attitude was far from unparalleled: Mr King, the master in Kipling's *Stalky & Co.* stories (published in 1899), once voices that same sentiment; C. Merivale expressed similar views in a letter of 1840, written during a trip to Ireland (references and brief discussion in Vance [1997], 239).

30 Cf. Hingley (2010) for a general discussion of the role of the Wall in debates on the divide between England and Scotland.

Figure 2 Robert Spence, *The Attack on the North Gate at Housesteads by the Caledonians,* 1912, The Society of Antiquaries, Newcastle upon Tyne. Reproduced by permission.

Saxons" across the North Sea. The rise of "pirates" brings down "the walls and defences of Britain", and civilisation itself comes to an end, only to be revived centuries later; its first beacon will be the arrival of the Christian missionaries sent by Pope Gregory the Great in 597. **(Figure 3)**

The Wall, then, is a mark of Roman civilisation, a frontier, and the unintended enabler of a process of decline. Ford's illustration suggests a far less problematic take, and squarely focuses on the first aspect: it depicts a moment in the construction of the Wall, in which a Roman officer oversees the labour of a crowd of faceless Britons, carrying on their shoulders the stones that will come to be part of the wall.[31] Their appearance is rather different from that of the Picts represented on the Wallington mural, and rather suggests associations with prehistory; the Wall in the background resembles a medieval castle, rather than any site of Roman Britain. Another strong line of continuity between the Roman empire and imperial Britain is suggested through that visual association. Kipling's contribution takes a different take, though. In the poem *The Roman Centurion Speaks,* which is inserted right in the middle of Fletcher's account of the rewards of Roman civilisation, an army officer addresses his legate on the day when the withdrawal of his cohort from the province is decided, and begs to let him stay. Britain has become his native land, as "time, custom, grief and toil, age, memory, service, love" have rooted him there.

The point is not elaborated further by Fletcher, but Kipling came back to the wider theme about a decade later, in a speech he gave to the Royal Society of St George.[32] The tone of the intervention is a times rather playful, as befitted the occasion, but at the core there is a serious point: the English are a mixed race, which has been ruled by a number of different peoples, and were influenced by many more, from the Phoenicians to the Dutch; since the accession of James I, they have been subjugated by the Scot, "under pretext of union" (179).[33] The speech opens with a strange story, whose provenance is left unstated. One night every year the Romans let the Picts and the Scots who lived on the other side of the Wall say what they thought of them. Kipling claims to be doing the same, now that "the Wall is down and the Picts and Scots are on this side of it" (178). As an Englishman, he claims to be doing what the subjects of Rome used to do, with the significant proviso that he is not divided from his masters by a wall, and

31 See Figure 2.

32 Kipling (1928).

33 On this speech and the dynamics of exclusion that pervade it see Hingley (2010), 38–39.

Figure 3 Henry J. Ford, *The Building of the Wall*, from C. R. L. Fletcher and Rudyard Kipling, *A School History of England* (Oxford 1911) 23. Reproduced from Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/schoolhistoryofeooflet/page/22/mode/2up

he cannot expect them to be quite as tolerant as the Romans used to be – while "imperturbable tolerance" is a key national trait of the English. The collapse of the Wall, of course, is one of the very factors that made the English so mixed, and so unique.

By according such a prominent place to the Wall in his speech, Kipling no doubt intended to prompt the memory of a well-known work of his, *Puck of Pook's Hill*, published in 1905, and partly set on Hadrian's Wall. One of the narrators of the series of tales that make up the book is the centurion Parnesius: a native of the isle of Wight, who calls himself a Roman even though he has never seen the Eternal City; his father urged him to serve in the army, and to fight for the defence of the island from the attacks of the Picts; the account of his journey to the Wall, as the roads become emptier and the settlements smaller, must be one of the most powerful literary descriptions of the Roman frontier.[34] That is a largely fictional account, just as that of a single town that ran from one end of the Wall to another. The Wall is represented as a monument, rather than a military site. Parnesius is not involved in any military action, as the Picts seldom fight, and most of them have moved to the north of the province; some "tame Picts" have stayed in the area and are doing small business with the Romans. Parnesius readily establishes himself as one of the few Romans who are able to understand and effectively deal with the Picts: his opinion of them, though, is unreservedly scathing, as he defines as "improvident little animals" who must be kept at bay by the occasional donation of corn; he comes to regard them as "in

34 "Just when you think you are at the world's end, you see a smoke from East to West as far as the eye can turn, and then, under it, also as far as the eye can stretch, houses and temples, shops and theatres, barracks and granaries, trickling along like dice behind – always behind – one long, low, rising and falling, and hiding and showing line of towers. And that is the Wall!" – Rosemary Sutcliff, a lifelong admirer of Kipling, described the newly constructed Wall in closely comparable terms in *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1954): "From Luguvallium in the west to Segedunum in the east, the Wall ran, leaping along with the jagged contours of the land; a great gash of stone-work, still raw with newness. Eighty miles of fortresses, mile-castles, watch-towers, strung on one great curtain wall, and backed by the vallum ditch and the coast-to-coast Legionary road; and huddled along its southern side, the low sprawl of wine shops, temples, married quarters, and markets that always gathered in the wake of the Legions. A great and never-ceasing smother of noise: voices, marching feet, turning wheels, the ring of hammer on armourer's anvil, the clear calling of trumpets over all. This was the great Wall of Hadrian, shutting out the menace of the north". The standpoint, though, is that of a bird-eye view, and the defensive purpose of the Wall, which is a leading theme of the novel, is emphatically spelled out, rather than its liminal position.

some sort my children". Even when the situation on the Wall appears to be reasonably stable, though, Parnesius is acutely aware of the danger, and of the consequences that the emperor Maximus' failure to send him reinforcements will have. After the emperor's death, Parnesius and his men endure a long attack of the Picts, for over two months, until the enemy withdraw and they are reached by the troops of Theodosius, the new emperor, whom Parnesius duly refuses to serve.[35] Like in Spence's painting, the fall of Roman Britain is not quite happening just yet, but its conditions are well in place.[36] In the poem that closes the story, *A Pict Song*, the Picts speak of themselves as "the worm in the wood, the rot in the root", and freely acknowledge that they are not strong – "but we know Peoples who are. Yes, and we'll guide them along, to smash and destroy you in War!".

5. COLLINGWOOD'S TARGETED EXCAVATIONS AND THE RE-INTERPRETATION OF THE FRONTIER

In the early twentieth century, then, the reading of the Wall as a defensive structure was as influential as it was fraught with reservations, qualifications, and fragilities. Further layers of complexity were added by the developments of archaeological research, which continued at a pace until the outbreak of the war. Haverfield's case for a methodological shift proved compelling, and set the agenda irreversibly, even though from the start of the century Haverfield was no longer directly involved in archaeological work. A major figure in that phase was Frank Gerald Simpson (1882–1955), who carried out crucial work at Birdoswald;[37] the scholar who recognised and articulated most clearly the historical and conceptual implications of that new season in the study of Hadrian's Wall was a pupil of Haverfield, whose unique intellectual trajectory took him to the intersection between archaeology and metaphysics: Robin George Collingwood (1889–1943).

---

35 On the impact of *Puck of Pook's Hill* see Hingley (2000), 56–58; cf. also Symonds (2021), 56–58 and Stewart (2016), 81. On Kipling's complex take on the Christianisation of the Empire see Walsh (2021), 375–380.

36 On Kipling's keen interest in the end of Roman Britain see Adler (2015), 169–174.

37 See Birley (1961), 200–203.

Like Haverfield, Collingwood had no direct connection with the North East; his career was entirely spent at Oxford. His commitment to the principle of concentrated archaeological work on carefully selected portions of the Wall was based on strong theoretical foundations, which are directly linked to the philosophical dimension of Collingwood's interests. They are articulated in two papers published in the *Journal of Roman Studies* ten years apart, in 1921 and in 1931. The first one is a magisterial overview of the scholarship on the Wall since Camden, which ends with a discussion of Simpson's work and on overview of the open problems; in fact, as briefly mentioned at the start of this discussion, the whole paper frames Hadrian's Wall as a *problem*.[38] The second piece is a survey of the work carried out in the previous decade, where the key stakes of ongoing research are spelled out. That does not stop Collingwood from pursuing a rather technical discussion. His starting point, in fact, is that professional archaeologists, committed to the method of selective excavation, are now devoting their energy to it; at the same time, there is greater interest among the public, and "general consternation" about the lack of sufficient protection against destruction.[39] Collingwood's conclusions revolve around problems of dating and periodisation. He identifies three phases in the making of the British frontier: first under Trajan, with the creation of some forts at the Stanegate; then with the drawing of the Vallum, early in Hadrian's reign; and finally the Wall, during his visit to Britain in 121 CE. The Wall itself then goes through four phases, until its abandonment in 383. Only three attacks in two and a half centuries saw any damage being caused to the Wall, mostly when it had been left unguarded. As a frontier defence, the Wall served its purpose very effectively.[40] Only detailed archaeological work had made that conclusion attainable. Collingwood does not draw attention to the tension between this reading and the argument that he had put forward in another essay published in 1921 (and reprinted in the appendix to this paper), in a rather obscure regional publication, where he had suggested that the Wall was not a large-scale defensive structure, but a sentry walk, which was intended to control traffic into and out of the province – a view that devel-

38 Collingwood (1921a). On the philosophical implications of this approach see van der Dussen (1981), 225–253; Salas (1987), 66–69; Couse (1990), 62–77; Browning (1995), 337–357; Birley (2013), 272–274.

39 Collingwood (1931), 39.

40 Collingwood (1931), 61.

oped Haverfield's insight into the function of the Vallum as a frontier, and had considerable impact on later debates on the Wall.[41]

Collingwood devotes the final part of his 1931 essay to a plea for the general significance of that specific finding to the wider interpretation of the Roman empire, and for the profound methodological implications of the study of that "single highly complex problem". The fundamental postulate of the project, though, is that "the real is the rational and the rational is the real"; and history can prove its worth only by demonstrating the rationality of its subject matter.[42] The Wall, then, turns into an invaluable opportunity to recognise an immanent order to the world. Collingwood's discussion develops in clear and radical terms an important layer of the link between the construction of the Wall and the wider political and social order. The connection also emerges from the overviews of the archaeology of Roman Britain that Collingwood produced in the 1930s, in which the "making of the frontier" is singled out as a cardinal problem.[43]

In those very years a literary text framed the problem in altogether different, but not unrelated terms. The plot of the fantasy novel *Land Under England,* published in 1935 by the Irish writer Joseph O'Neill (1886–1952), builds on the fascination that the father of the protagonist has with Rome and Hadrian's Wall. When the man disappears, his son Anthony seeks him out in the Cumbrian countryside, following the trail of their many trips along the Wall. He goes on to discover the "secret of the Wall" under a pond: a trapdoor that becomes visible once the water runs dry, and that leads him into an underworld populated by the descendants of the Roman soldiers that used to be quartered on the Wall, now ruled by a despotic regime that controls their thought by telepathy, and leaves no room for individual agency. Anthony is presented with a reverse image of the Empire: there is a Roma Nova, and there is Central Sea that clearly mirrors the Mediterranean. Virgil and Dante are obvious intertexts; the allusions to

---

41 Collingwood (1921b). The view is still implied in Collingwood (1930), 78 ("it cannot be defended"). See Birley (2013), 277–278, esp. n. 10, drawing attention to some dissenting voices that emerged in the early 21st century; cf. 284 n. 22 on later assessments of the *Vallum.* See also Dench (2018), 61–62.

42 Collingwood (1931), 62. Browning (1995), 338–339 views this passage as evidence for Collingwood's position as the initiator of a "Baconian revolution in history".

43 That is the title of ch. 8 of Collingwood and Myres (1937), 120–139 (see esp. 133 on the military and financial functions of the Roman frontier); cf. also Collingwood (1930), 64–91, esp. 73–86 on the "Hadrianic frontier".

Fascist totalitarianism are also evident, but the Irish background of the author and the political context of newly independent Ireland may also be playing a significant role.[44] The Wall is turned into a new kind of boundary, which is as political as it is anthropological. It is a deceptively porous one, which must be crossed in order to overcome a crisis or get to attain truths that are otherwise hidden; the crossing, though, is vertical, rather than horizontal; and the protagonist is himself the descendant of Romans (or so his surname suggests), who is confronted with fellow-Romans that live under a stiflingly authoritarian regime, where the holders of power are not quite visible.

6. TWENTIETH-CENTURY AFTERLIVES

As we have seen, the problem of the continuity of British history was a significant strand in the reflection on the Wall between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. When Winston Churchill (1874–1965) set out to produce *A History of the English-speaking Peoples*, though, it was readily solved. The focus was placed on the need to discuss the origins of civilisation in Britain, and the arrival of Caesar's troops proved a neat starting point; English history was carefully distinguished from British history, and its inception coincided with the victorious arrival of the Saxons. The work was published in 1952, but the bulk of it was written by 1937. The decision not to confine the discussion to England or Britain, but to take the standpoint of the history of the whole English-speaking world is not surprising, both in light of Churchill's political trajectory and of the coincidental fact that his mother was American.

Rome is a necessary opening section for the large-scale project that Churchill developed. He describes Roman rule in warmly favourable terms, as "the happiest, most comfortable, and most enlightened times" (35) that the inhabitants of Britain had ever experienced; it was nonetheless the outcome of a process of conquest, through which Rome got to assert its superior military might. The frontiers remain troublesome sites, which require the deployment of a robust contingent of troops; Churchill acknowledges the importance of that aspect of the problem in his discussion of the Wall, which implicitly takes its cue from

44 Howard (2019).

Haverfield's distinction between Wall and Vallum as military defence infrastructure and provincial boundary respectively.

In a remarkable passage, Churchill wonders how a native of Roman Chester would fare if he were to wake up in 1930s Britain. A long inventory of analogies and differences follow; the most striking one is surely that the Roman visitor "would have the same sense of belonging to a society which was threatened, and to an imperial rule which had passed its prime" (43). The following account of the process that led to the demise of the empire in the West was in keeping with that sentiment: from the third century the empire was under increasing strain, both internal and external, and the "floods of new untamed life" presented new challenges that only a renewed spirit of discipline and cohesion could face effectively. The Wall fulfilled its defensive mission until about 300 CE, in spite of the recurring attacks of Picts and Scots; it then had to be supplemented with a set of fortresses at various sites on the southern and eastern shores. The effort was generous, but ultimately unsuccessful: by the end of the century it had been "pierced" several times. Roman civilisation was "wrecked" across Britain, in Churchill's assessment, by the early sixth century. Repairing that damage would take centuries. While Britain had been an active, if marginal part of a world state; England was "once again a barbarian island".

The demise of the Wall is thus the symptom of a process of much greater proportions and significance. The mass migration that led to the end of Roman Britain was largely from the sea, and no defensive infrastructure could have possibly weathered it. The only substantial hurdle that the Anglo-Saxon invasion faced was a landscape feature: Mount Badon, where the Britons won a major battle at the end of the fifth century or the start of the sixth. Not even Rome had sought to expand in those parts, and the fact that that a mountain turned out to be a "citadel of the British race" is both testimony to the valour of the British resistance and a sign of the extent of the decline that set in with the end of the Roman province. A new history had well and truly begun.

Churchill's decision to write a history of the English-speaking peoples is in itself a response to the realignment in world politics that had intervened in the first half of the twentieth century, and would gain further momentum after World War II. The history of Hadrian's Wall in the post-war period, and in the age in which the British Empire is undone, lies beyond the remit of this paper. However, some fundamental and problematic levels of continuity between the distant past and the present are most strikingly brought to the fore in a piece written shortly before the war by W. H. Auden (1907–1973) for a 1937 BBC radio broadcast entitled *Hadrian's Wall from Julius Caesar* to *the National Trust,* which

is worth touching upon by way of conclusion.[45] The recording of the programme does not survive, but two typescripts preserve it almost in its entirety. It featured the reading of a poem that was going to gain considerable notoriety after World War II under the title *Roman Wall Blues,* where a Roman soldier voices fundamentally different feelings to those of the protagonist of Kipling's *A Centurion Speaks* (ll. 3–6, 12):

> The rain comes pattering out of the sky,
> I am a Wall soldier, and I don't know why.
> The mist creeps over the hard grey stone,
> my girl's in Tungria; I sleep alone …
> I want my girl and I want my pay.[46]

The core of the broadcast was an extensive prose piece in which a narrator and several other speaking voices go through the history of Britain in antiquity, since the early journeys of the Phoenicians, down to the end of Roman rule. The construction of the Wall receives special attention. Auden retells the story through the fictional dialogues of a family of tourists and two ancient inhabitants of the Wall. Hadrian "set out to construct a systematic frontier" (444), which had the purpose of stopping "raiding parties and smugglers" (446);[47] its history is then traced through the Middle Ages to the early modern antiquarian rediscovery of the Wall. In the final vignette two speakers reflect on the Wall in the contemporary world, when "[p]arts of the Wall now belong to The National Trust or The Office of Works. But digging and research continue". The argument they put forward then takes a sharp political turn: "Latin is now a dead language, a school subject and no longer even a compulsory one. The Roman Empire has disappeared, but other empires have taken its place, and the virtues and the vices of Imperialism, its ideal and its scandals, are as great a problem now as then" (455). The final paragraph makes an even more radical contention, and brings the Wall into sharper focus: "That man is born a savage, there needs no other proof than the Roman Wall. It characterises both nations as robbers and murderers. Our old historians always termed the Scots barbarians… Julius Caesar, Agricola,

45 Edited in Auden and Isherwood (1988), 441–455.

46 Auden and Isherwood (1988), 447.

47 Bryce (1914), 18–19 had used a similar language in speaking of a "scientific frontier" (see above).

Antoninus, Severus, etc., went one step further than the Scots. They surprised, murdered, plundered, and kept possession. Our venerable ancestors too, the Saxons, Danes, and Normans who came over in swarms, butchered, robbed and possessed; although they had no more right than I have to your coat. Whoever deprives an unoffending man of his right, is a barbarian" (*ibid.*).

In the notes that he prefaced to an early synopsis of the script, Auden approached the problem of the contemporary relevance of the Wall from a different angle, and in even more explicit terms. He argued that it "stood as a symbol for a certain imperialistic conception of life, for military discipline and an international order; in opposition to Celtic and German tribal loyalties which overwhelmed it, only to be transformed, in their turn… The front of history now lies elsewhere, but the same issues, of order versus liberty; the State versus the individual; the more highly economically developed races versus the less, still remain…".[48] The Wall emerges as a front, rather than as a boundary; it can best be made sense of as a hub of conflict.

It is by no means necessary to be an admirer of the Empire to appreciate the Wall as a marker of power and conflict, and to view it as a prime focus of reflection on historical method. In this fundamental recognition there is an important level of continuity which, in spite of their profound differences, brings together Bruce and Collingwood, Haverfield and Churchill, Kipling and Auden, and cannot cease to interrogate the students of the Wall, and indeed of ancient Rome, in the early twenty-first century.[49]

***

48 On this text, first published in *Radio Times* in November 1937, see the editorial note by E. Mendelson in Auden and Isherwood (1988), 675.

49 An earlier Italian version of this paper has appeared as Santangelo (2026). It is a pleasure to restate my gratitude to Fabrizio Oppedisano and Paola S. Salvatori for the invitation to pursue this topic, and to thank Francesco Carriere, Giusto Traina, David Walsh, and two anonymous readers for their comments on various drafts of this paper.

APPENDIX – R. G. COLLINGWOOD'S "THE PURPOSE OF THE ROMAN WALL"

Collingwood's earliest contribution on Hadrian's Wall (Collingwood 1921b) appeared in a regional publication that is hardly accessible outside the United Kingdom: *The Vasculum. The North Country Quarterly of Science and Local History,* 8, 1921, 4–9. It seems apt to reprint this short note, which foregrounds some of the arguments that Collingwood would soon go on to make in the longer piece he published in *Journal of Roman Studies,* 11, 1921 (Collingwood 1921a; cf. 66 n. 1), and includes some thought-provoking engagement with Kipling's depiction of the Wall.

The purpose of the Roman wall
R. G. Collingwood, M.A., F.S.A.

Among the many questions which historians and antiquaries have asked concerning the Roman wall of Northumberland and Cumberland – the most striking and most discussed relic of antiquity, perhaps, in these islands – there is one that has been curiously seldom raised. What precise object had its builders in view? How exactly did they intend to use it, and how did they in fact use it?

The question has not been raised because the answer has been taken for granted. It has always been assumed that the Wall was a military work in the fullest sense, a continuous fortification like the wall of a town, designed to repel or at least to check invading armies not, in this case, attacking the outskirts of any mere city but those of a province. The Roman troops have always been imagined lining the top of the Wall and from that strong position, entrenched as it were on the rampart-walk behind the parapet, repelling the attacks of Caledonian armies that attempted to carry the work by breach or escalade.

Many circumstances help to make such a view credible. The Wall was some eight feet thick and perhaps fifteen to twenty feet high including the parapet: its immense strength – for it is practically a concrete wall cast solid into a facing of ashlar masonry – rendered it proof against anything short of scientific mining-work such as that of the Middle Ages; its tactical position, defended by a great ditch and in many places crowning the summit of inaccessible precipices, seemed specially designed for this kind of employment. But there are certain features of the Wall which have never been taken into account by this view, and seem hardly capable of being reconciled with it. The object of this paper is to state them, and to suggest a possible explanation of them.

(1) The ordinary view has had the advantage of statement in late years by a man peculiarly qualified for the work. To think out of the way in which the Romans can have used their Wall is a task which requires a certain knowledge of Roman antiquities, but, far more, a vivid imagination and a knowledge of what fighting means. That is the special value of Mr. Kipling's picture of the Wall and doings on the Wall in *Puck of Pook's Hill*. He there represents the Roman auxiliary cohorts of the Wall garrison in the traditional way as fighting barbarians from the Wall; and he sees clearly that that implies definite tactical methods, namely archery and catapult or ballista fire. "We are all archers on the Wall, " says his Parnesius; and rightly, if one thinks of the necessities of such a tactical position. But as a matter of the fact the Wall garrison did not consist of archers, and all of the evidence is against Mr. Kipling's liberal supply (or almost any supply) of artillery. The auxiliaries were armed in the ordinary Roman fashion, with the pilum and gladius; and though a heavy throwing-spear like the pilum would be useful to throw off a wall at a Caledonian, each man was only issued with two of them, and their use was to give a kind of "preparation" for a charge with the short sword. A man on the top of the Roman Wall who had thrown his two pila and was armed with nothing but a short sword would be simply put out of action; there would be nothing further for him to do while the enemy began at leisure to prepare their works for a breach or escalade. Late in the history of Roman occupation, the legionary armament was being replaced by the bow and other light weapons, so that by the time of Parnesius (A.D. 383–388), there may have been plenty of archers on the Wall; but when the Wall was designed, and for the first two centuries of its history, there were practically none. Thus the ordinary theory is inconsistent with Roman tactics and armament.

(2) Secondly, it is inconsistent with the general plan of the Wall itself. The rampart walk cannot have been more than three or four feet broad, and that is a very narrow fighting-front. There would be barely room for a man to pass behind the actual firing line; no room, if the "firing" line consisted of men throwing, with the necessary freedom of gesture, a heavy six-foot pilum. It would be practically impossible to reinforce a threatened point, even in the most favourable conditions: wholly impossible to move wounded men. And a few corpses, or a couple of Caledonians who had effected an escalade, would block the walk entirely. For the walk could only be reached from the ground at the turrets, and these were 500 yards apart. Let anyone try to imagine a front-line trench during an attack with the conditions that the "trench" is a wall-top 15 feet from the ground and that access can only be had at points 500 yards apart, the turrets tak-

ing the place of communication trenches; and he will recognize the impossibility of fighting on the Wall in the traditional way.

(3) As for artillery (catapults and ballistæ), the normal width of the Wall leaves no room for them. On the turf wall which Lollius Urbicus built between Forth and Clyde at the command of Antoninus Pius there are what are called "periodic expansions" which might have been artillery-emplacements, though in point of fact it is fairly certain that they were emplacements for signalling-beacons. On Hadrian's Wall there is nothing of the sort. It might be fancied that the tops of the turrets would carry catapults; but the picture of similar turrets on the Danubian frontier-works which are preserved on the Column of Trajan make it quite certain that that turrets of this type with signalling-stations and not emplacements for artillery. If there were any "guns of position" on the Wall they were only at the mile-castles and great forts.

(4) A very striking piece of evidence comes from a certain innovation in defensive works introduced, probably, not very late in the fourth century. This was the invention of bastions. In the second century the Romans built defensive walls in a straight line in front of which as a rule nothing projected. In the third century this still held good, except that gate-towers what were oftener pushed out beyond the wall at this stage. But some time in the fourth century it was discovered that a wall could be periodically flanked by bastions and its strength thereby vastly augmented, especially when the use of bastions coincided with the increasing use of the bow. Fortifications first built in the fourth century appear to have had bastions from the start; at the same time many earlier works dating from the pre-bastion epoch were brought up to date by patching bastions on to them. Examples of the first class are the late forts of the Saxon shore, as at Pevensey, Lympne and elsewhere; of the second class, a conspicuous example is London. Like all civil towns of Roman Britain, London was at first unwalled; When the *pax Romana* became less secure, perhaps about the end of the third century, walls were built there as elsewhere; lastly, bastions were added. Now bastions were never added to Hadrian's Wall: and this is strange if it was the actual defensive line of the frontier. It is true that the cohort-forts of the Hadrianic age were also unbastioned, but their small size and compactness made this additional strength unnecessary, whereas the seventy-three miles of Hadrian's Wall afforded the best possible opportunity for the useful employment of the new device.

These facts – the intrinsic difficulty of fighting on the Wall as it was arranged; the impossibility of doing so with the weapons of the Roman soldier; the absence of bastions and of provision for artillery – may suffice to throw a certain doubt

on the traditional view. That view has been made to seem more reasonable than it is by the modern employment of continuous works of a defensive character; but a careful analysis of the differences between the lines of Torres Vedras, or a modern system of trenches, Hadrian's Wall ought to convince anyone that the wall can hardly have been meant as a defensive work in this sense. In the interests of brevity we may set aside the question whether it could have been adequately manned by the 10,000 men whom it was designed to accommodate, and the question whether Roman officers, trained in the tradition of fighting in the open and sleeping behind fortifications, would have planned such a work for such a purpose; and proceed to suggest an alternative explanation.

From an early period the Romans adopted the principle of reducing and securing enemy country by means of blockhouses, as they were called in the last phase of the South African war; small fortified posts with stationary garrisons, mobile in so far as they could strike a sudden blow in any direction, but fixed to their post rather than moving about the country. It became a recognised part, and a highly important part, of Roman military science to design, carry out, and maintain a network of such posts after the field army of conquest had done it preliminary work of breaking down concentrated enemy forces. Two great men of the early Empire are especially known to us for their skill in this craft: the emperor Tiberius, who in his brilliant youth practised it on the middle Danube, and Agricola in Britain. We are only now beginning to recover the blockhouse-system of Agricola, fort by fort: we know that it spread thickly over the north of England and extended over the Cheviots and beyond the Forth to the other side of Perth. Sometimes, even as early as the time of Agricola, the forts tend to group themselves in something that may be called a defensive line; this happens with Agricola's own forts along the Forth-Clyde line, rebuilt and connected with a turf wall 60 years later by Lollius Urbicus. But in such cases there is nothing like a continuous wall; only a line of forts a few miles apart.

The continuous wall, or fence, or ditch, begins about the same time or a little later. But in its origin it serves a different purpose from the line of forts; for while the latter contain bodies of troops intended to cope with armed enemy forces, the continuous line was at first designed to serve simply as a mark to show where the Roman territory ended. With this primary function was combined the secondary function, not always emphasised by the character of the work, of being an obstacle to smugglers, or robbers, or other undesirables. A man from beyond the frontier, found on the Roman side of the line, could not plead ignorance or innocent intentions if the line was clearly marked; and if, in addition, it was a slight obstacle, crossing it otherwise then at the authorised and control

gateways was proof of a sinister purpose. All this is abundantly clear from the actual character of the German frontiers of the Roman Empire, which are closely analogous to the British. But the British frontier is apparently a later and more highly developed example of the same type. We have here three developed examples of the same type. We have here three elements: the forts, the Vallum, and the Wall with its annexed milecastles and turrets. The Vallum has been for centuries a puzzle to antiquaries simply because they approached it with the preconception that it must have been meant for defensive earthwork. How it can have been defended no one has ever informed us, and everyone who has thought about it has concluded that it cannot have been, except subject to some impossible condition (as, reinforced by palisades, which never existed). The puzzle of the Vallum simply disappeared when it is suggested that it was not a defensive work but a frontier-mark, a line indelibly impressed upon the earth to show the wandering native where he might not go without accounting for his movements. Here the line-element is emphasised, and the secondary obstacle-element is wholly absent, for even in its first youth the Vallum was no obstacle to anything short of wheeled traffic.

The non-military character of the Vallum is today an accepted fact; no one unless he is twenty-five years out of date in his information regards it as anything but a Roman frontier-mark. But the abandonment of a military theory of the Vallum seems to prepare the way for a similar process of thought in relation to the Wall. Mr. F. Gerald Simpson has shown, in a paper shortly to be published, that the first Hadrianic frontier in Britain consisted of the stone forts, much as we know them, connected by the Vallum: that is to say a frontier-mark was drawn upon the ground and fortified by blockhouses: and that after a short time the non-defensive Vallum was replaced by the Wall.[50] What was the exact significance of this change?

It was not, in the present writer's opinion, the substitution of a fortification for a mere mark. We have already seen the difficulties in the way of regarding the Wall as a fortification directed against invading armies. The Wall which took the place of the slightly earlier Vallum was a work of the same pattern, belonging to the same series, as the Vallum itself: the series of frontier-marks whose primary function might or might not be combined with the secondary function

50 *Editorial note:* this is a reference to F. G. Simpson and R. C. Shaw, *The Purpose and Date of the* Vallum *and its Crossings,* in *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society,* 2, 1922, 353–433.

of being an obstacle to readers or smugglers. The wall took the line of the crags not for tactical reasons but in order to increase the outlook of the sentries: for in essence the entire structure was an elevated sentry-walk, the centuries being supplied from the garrisons of the milecastles and having the turrets as their immediate quarters when on duty. And the work of garrisoning the milecastles may well have fallen in rotation upon the centuries of the cohort in the nearest fort.

The frontier was always more or less disturbed; but the existence of a properly patrolled wall would be enough to prevent minor disturbances in the shape of small parties of raiders or expelled malefactors from northern tribes from penetrating into Roman territory. Anyone who had good reasons for coming in could come through the forts or by the gate on Dere Street at Stagshaw Bank. But when disturbance ripened into war, when large forces from the north advanced upon the Wall and attempted (as no doubt they did, not always unsuccessfully) to penetrate it, we cannot imagine that the Roman cohorts actually lined up on the rampart-walk to repel them, still less than Hadrian's engineers ever contemplated such a proceeding. They threw open the north gates and marched out to fight them *more Romano.*

***

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adler (2015). – Eric Adler, 'Kipling's Rome in *Puck of Pook's Hill*', in *Classical Receptions Journal* 7 (2015) 159–176.

Anonymous (1932). – Anonymous, 'Schoolboys on the Wall', in *Greece & Rome* 1 (1932) 106.

Auden & Isherwood (1988). – Wystan Hugh Auden & Christopher Isherwood, *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden. Plays and Other Dramatic Writings, 1928–1938*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton 1988).

Birley (1961). – Eric Birley, *Research on Hadrian's Wall* (Kendal 1961).

Birley (2013). – Tony Birley, 'Collingwood as an Archaeologist and Historian', in *R. G. Collingwood: An Autobiography and Other Writings, with Essays on Collingwood's Life and Work*, eds. David Boucher & Teresa Smith (Oxford 2013) 271–304.

Breeze (2020). – David J. Breeze, *The Pilgrimages of Hadrian's Wall 1849–2019: A History* (Kendal 2020).

Breeze (2024). – David J. Breeze, *The Iconic Landscapes of Hadrian's Wall,* in *Hadrian's Wall. In Our Time,* ed. David J. Breeze (Oxford 2024) 8–20.

Bridge (1932). – James J. R. Bridge, 'The Roman Wall', in *Greece & Rome* 1 (1932) 158–162.

Browning (1991). – Michael Browning, 'Archaeology Historicized: Romano-British Frontier Studies and German Historiography at the Turn of the Century', in Valerie A. Maxwell & Michael J. Dobson (eds.), *Roman Frontier Studies. Proceedings of the XVth International Congress of the Roman Frontier Studies* (Exeter 1991) 354–357.

Bruce (1905). – Gainsford Bruce, *The Life and Letters of John Collingwood Bruce* (Edinburgh & London 1905).

Bruce (1851). – John Collingwood Bruce, *The Roman Wall* (London 1851).

Bryce (1914). – James Bryce, *The Ancient Roman Empire and the British Empire in India. The Diffusion of Roman and English Law throughout the World. Two Historical Studies* (London 1914).

Collingwood (1921a). – Robin G. Collingwood, 'Hadrian's Wall: A History of the Problem', in *Journal of Roman Studies* 11 (1921) 37–66.

Collingwood (1921b). – Robin G. Collingwood, 'The Purpose of the Roman Wall', in *The Vasculum* 8 (1921) 4–9.

Collingwood (1930). – Robin G. Collingwood, *The Archaeology of Roman Britain* (London 1930).

Collingwood (1931). – Robin G. Collingwood, 'Hadrian's Wall: 1921–1930', in *Journal of Roman Studies* 21 (1931) 36–64.

Collingwood & Myres (1937²). – Robin G. Collingwood & John N. L. Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (Oxford 1937²; 1st ed. 1936).

Couse (1990). – Geoffrey S. Couse, 'Collingwood's Detective Image of the Historian and the Study of Hadrian's Wall', in *History and Theory* 29 (1990) 57–77.

Curzon (1908²). – Lord Curzon, *Frontiers. The Romanes Lecture 1907* (Oxford 1908²).

Curzon (2022). – George Nathaniel Curzon, *Frontiere,* ed. Achille Zarlenga (Lanciano 2022).

Dench (2018). – Emma Dench, *Empire and Political Cultures in the Roman World* (Cambridge 2018).

Desideri (1991). – Paolo Desideri, 'La romanizzazione dell'impero', in Arnaldo Momigliano & Aldo Schiavone (eds.), *Storia di Roma* 2.2 (Turin 1991) 577–626.

van der Dussen (1981). – Willem Johannis van der Dussen, *History as a Science: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (The Hague – Boston – London 1981).

Fletcher & Kipling (1911). – Charles R. L. Fletcher & Rudyard Kipling, *A History of England* (Oxford 1911).

Freeman (2007). – Philip Freeman, *The Best Training Ground for Archaeologists. Francis Haverfield and the Invention of Romano-British Archaeology* (Oxford 2007).

Garnons Williams (1935). – Basil H. Garnons Williams, 'The Study of Roman Britain in a Sixth Form', in *Greece & Rome* 4 (1935) 129–138.

Haverfield (1899). – Francis Haverfield, 'Five Years' Excavations on the Roman Wall', in *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society* 15 (1899) 337–344.

Haverfield (1905). – Francis Haverfield, 'The Romanization of Roman Britain', in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 2 (1905) 185–217.

Haverfield (1911). – Francis Haverfield, 'An Inaugural Address Delivered before the First Annual General Meeting of the Society, 11 May 1911', in *Journal of Roman Studies* 1 (1911) xi–xx.

Haverfield (1924). – Francis Haverfield, *The Roman Occupation of Britain,* ed. G. MacDonald (Oxford 1924).

Hingley (2000). – Richard Hingley, *Roman Officers and English Gentlemen. The Imperial Origins of Roman Archaeology* (London & New York 2000).

Hingley (2008). – Richard Hingley, *The Recovery of Roman Britain 1586–1906. A Colony so Fertile* (Oxford 2008).

Hingley (2010). – Richard Hingley, 'The Most Ancient Boundary between England and Scotland: Genealogies of the Roman Walls', in *Classical Receptions Journal* 2 (2010) 25–43. https://doi.org/10.1093/crj/clq001

Hingley (2012). – Richard Hingley, *Hadrian's Wall: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012).

Howard (2019). – Richard J. Howard, 'Estranging Ireland: the Underground Self of the Irish Free State in Joseph O'Neill's *Land Under England*', in *Irish Studies Review* 27 (2019) 235–252. https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2019.1600640

Hoyer (1908). – Maria Hoyer, *By the Roman Wall: Notes on a Summer Holiday* (London 1908). https://archive.org/details/byromanwallnotesoohoyeuoft

Kipling (1928). – Rudyard Kipling, 'England and the English', in *A Book of Words: Selections from Speeches and Addresses Delivered between 1906 and 1927* (London 1928) 175–187.

Lambert (2004). – Danielle H. Lambert, *Decolonizing Roman Imperialism. The Study of Rome, Romanization, and the Postcolonial Lens* (Cambridge 2024).

Lovell Stewart-Breeze-Wilson (2024). – Martha Lovell Stewart, David J. Breeze and Kelvin Wilson, 'The Portraits of John Collingwood Bruce', in *Archaeologia Aeliana* s. 6, 3 (2024) 353–373.

Lucas (1912). – Charles Prestwood Lucas, *Greater Rome and Greater Britain* (Oxford 1912).

Malamud (2010). – Margaret Malamud, '*Translatio imperii:* America as the New Rome c. 1900', in Maggie Bradley (ed.), *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire* (Oxford 2010) 249–283.

Mommsen (1885). – Theodor Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte. Fünfter Band: Die römischen Provinzen von Caesar bis Diocletian* (Berlin 1885).

Salas (1987). – Carlos G. Salas, 'Collingwood's Historical Principles at Work', in *History and Theory* 26 (1987) 53–71.

Santangelo (2026). – Federico Santangelo, 'Il Vallo di Adriano, tra confine e monumento', in Fabrizio Oppedisano e Paola S. Salvatori (eds.), *Delimitare la nazione. Confini e uso politico del passato fra Ottocento e Novecento* (Rome 2026) 51–74.

Stewart (2016). – Rory Stewart, *The Marches. Border Walks with My Father* (London 2016).

Symonds (2021). – Matthew F. A. Symonds, *Hadrian's Wall. Creating Division* (London 2021).

Tolia-Kelly (2011). – Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, 'Narrating the Post-colonial Landscape: Archaeologies of Race at Hadrian's Wall', in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36 (2011) 71–88.

Vance (1997). – Norman Vance, *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (Oxford & Cambridge, MA 1997).

Weigall (1926). – Arthur Weigall, *Wanderings in Roman Britain* (London 1926).

Walsh (2021). – David Walsh, 'Evangelicalism and Empire: Rudyard Kipling on the Roman Cult of Mithras and Christianization', in *Classical Receptions Journal* 13 (2021) 368–383.

Wright (1852). – Thomas Wright, *The Celt, the Roman, and the Saxon: a History of the Early Inhabitants of Britain, Down to the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity* (London, 1852).

Federico Santangelo
DIRAAS – Sezione di Antichistica
Università di Genova
Via Balbi 2
16126 Genova
Italy
federico.santangelo@unige.it

Suggested citation
Santangelo, Federico: Hadrian's Wall, 1850–1950: Frontier and Monument. In: thersites 21 (2026), pp. 1–38.
https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol21.304