

The New Criterion

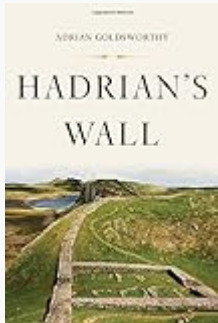
Reconsiderations June 2018

They built the wall

by Nigel Spivey

A review of Hadrian's Wall by Adrian Goldsworthy.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Adrian Goldsworthy

Hadrian's Wall

Basic Books, 192 pages, \$25.00

The territory known as the United Kingdom contains two major archeological landmarks. One is the prehistoric megalith circle of Stonehenge; the other is the coast-to-coast defense system we call Hadrian's Wall. Both monuments have been appropriated for conservation by charitable entities, patriotically titled "English Heritage" and the "National Trust." Yet neither Stonehenge nor Hadrian's Wall can confidently be claimed as indigenous. A plausible theory asserts that Stonehenge as it appears today was commissioned by a warrior-chieftain who came across from southern Germany. As for Hadrian's Wall, it was demonstrably built by detachments of three Roman legions—an army of occupation—and thereafter garrisoned by auxiliary troops drafted from various parts of the Roman empire. Among the most clearly attested of these auxiliaries are cohorts of Tungrians, whose homeland would include modern Brussels and Maastricht.

From Vindolanda, a Roman military camp located just south of Hadrian's Wall, numerous fragments of ancient communication have been retrieved—a detritus of personal and bureaucratic "paperwork" in Latin, inscribed upon wooden tablets preserved by invariably damp conditions.

Just one of these tablets refers to the indigenous people, and it is not a favorable reference. The locals are termed *Brittunculi*, along with a scornful observation about their inability to wield weapons while on horseback. (The author may have been a recruiting sergeant.) However one translates *Brittunculi*, it must be pejorative: “little Brits,” most literally, but perhaps “pesky” or “bloody” little Brits for idiomatic good measure.

The Vindolanda tablets were found several decades after W. H. Auden wrote his ditty “Roman Wall Blues” (1937), evoking a miserably cold Gallo-Belgic soldier on duty at some sentry-post along Hadrian’s Wall. *Over the heather the wet wind blows,/ I’ve lice in my tunic and a cold in my nose . . .* For anyone who has traversed the Wall, regardless of season, it requires little imaginative effort to empathize with Auden’s vignette. Letters salvaged from Vindolanda tend to confirm the bleak impression, with pleas for extra socks and underwear, and pressing requests for leave. This is an environment where no amount of Gore-Tex will keep a body dry. The only consolation, as you plod soggly over the exposed ruins of forts such as Vindolanda and Housesteads, comes when inspecting the hypocausts, and noting the annex of civilian accommodation. At least there were hot baths—and some officers brought their families. Surveying the extent of the defenses, however, a basic question persists. Here was not only a substantial wall extending over seventy miles of difficult terrain, with regular lookout towers and redoubtable gateways, but also a massive earthwork, the so-called *Vallum*—effectively a deep, wide ditch, and a feat of construction that would be formidable enough even with a fleet of trucks and bulldozers. We can only guess the man-years of shovelling involved. So—what was the point?

The ideology of Hadrian’s wall calls for further speculative exploration.

It is a principle of Adrian Goldsworthy’s succinct and eminently sensible new account of Hadrian’s Wall that the project was essentially “intended to assist the Roman army in performing the tasks assigned to it in northern Britain.”¹ One immediate rejoinder

to that premise is that Roman legionaries had strange ideas about making life easier for themselves, if they undertook this amount of muscular spadework—but never mind. To rationalize the effort remains a challenge. Goldsworthy patiently explains how the system worked, once it was in place, enabling the Romans to control such human traffic as there was in these limestone and basalt uplands. But—as we know—big walls tend to be built on big ideas. The ideology of this wall calls for further speculative exploration.

One clue comes in a small size: a currency-issue from Publius Aelius Hadrianus *ca.* 119 A.D., not long after he seized power (largely by *force majeure*). On one side of the coin, the emperor in profile: burly, bearded, wreathed with the laurel of victory. On its reverse, a female figure. She is robed and seated, with one foot resting upon a pile of rocks. Her attributes are some sort of scepter or spear, and a shield with a spike at its center. Her right hand is raised, as if to touch or support the side of her head. The legend below reads: *BRITANNIA*.

She certainly personifies the northernmost province of the Roman empire. But Britannia's body language upon this coin-type is not easy to read. Whether weapon or symbol of authority, her stave is ready, along with a piece of Celtic-style armor—so she is not obviously captive. That gesture of hand raised, and inclined head: is it resignation, or sorrow—or rather a poised attentiveness, a signal of “on guard”? Hadrian proceeded to style himself *Restitutor Orbis Terrarum*, “restorer” of the lands of the world. But what “restoration” he brought to Britannia remains unclear. He made a single visit to the province in the year 122, following a tour of the Rhineland, where he had ordered the installation of a palisaded frontier-line. We presume that it was during his British visit that Hadrian developed the frontier concept further, and gave instructions for the wall and the *Vallum*. Arguably, then, Britannia was not restored but fractured. For that is what walls do: break, mark, and divide the earth's surface. Britannia on the emperor's coinage may seem the faithful subject. Once broken by a wall, however, she becomes a phantom figure—and perhaps has stayed so ever since.

An ancient biographer of Hadrian relays just one sentiment about the wall: *qui barbaros Romanos divideret*, “that it should divide Romans from barbarians.” Terse though it is, the intentional clause is highly significant. It means that the *Brittunculi* dwelling south of the wall were considered *Romani*. Back in Rome, the idea of little Brits parading about in togas was something of a joke. Yet the category of being Roman, as opposed to barbarian, was key to imperial policy. It was part of the deal on offer from Rome. Collaborate with us—pay your taxes, give access to your natural resources, and render unto Caesar whatever was due to him, including veneration—and we, for our part, will provide civilization. Fresh water, hot baths, straight roads, law courts—one could extend the list into the realm of comedy caricature, but the analysis broadly holds. Like regular soldiers down the ages, Roman legionaries preferred not to fight. As the Vindolanda tablets indicate, their principal concerns were food, drink, and general well-being. Digging a ditch, or laying out an aqueduct, was always better than a spear in the guts. If only the Brits could be persuaded to study Cicero instead of clamoring for their battle-chariots, everyone would be so much happier.

Hadrian is reported as a stickler for discipline—a commander who regularly checked fitness for combat among the thirty legions at his command. But Hadrian is also portrayed as a Hellenist. Philosopher, pederast, architect: to each vocation might be attached the epithet *manqué*, but it seems the emperor indulged his passions with diligence. The visible trail he left behind—including his villa at Tivoli, the remodeled Pantheon, his mausoleum (Castel Sant'Angelo), and the portrait sequence of his boyfriend Antinous, cuteness epitomized—naturally tempts curiosity about Hadrian's “taste” and “vision.” Goldsworthy claims that Hadrian was “directly involved in many aspects of the planning of Hadrian's Wall,” but can offer no proof of such involvement. An enigma to his contemporaries, Hadrian reveals nothing to us beyond the monumental trail. Attempting to read his mind is a pastime that may go back a long way, though perhaps no one ever tried harder than Marguerite Yourcenar, who spent decades telepathically assembling her *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (1951). So if Hadrian's actual autobiography were by some chance to appear, what might we learn?

It seems unlikely that Hadrian was deeply apprised of tribal politics in Britannia. One proposed justification for the wall is that it served to prevent collusion (or, conceivably, collision) between the Brigantes, whose homeland lay somewhat south of the wall, and peoples further north, most notoriously the Picts or *Picti* ("painted ones"). Excavations currently being carried out close to a place called Scotch Corner, traditionally a stopover for travelers taking "the Great North Road" towards Scotland, may reveal more about these Brigantes, whose Queen Cartimandua famously sided with the Romans during the mid-first century. Meanwhile, let us credit Hadrian with some basic military intelligence. If an enemy mustered in thousands, no wall would prevent their movement, unless it were manned by a similarly numerous force. That truth applied across the empire, whose limits were necessarily porous and elastic. That is why Hadrian's successor, Antoninus Pius, tried a more northerly line across Britain. The latter (the "Antonine Wall," spanning the Firth of Forth and Firth of Clyde in central Scotland) did not hold for long, so Hadrian's Wall was reoccupied. Eventually it too became untenable. By the fifth century it was gathering picturesque decay. The place-names along the structure quaintly narrate the Anglo-Saxon takeover: Birdoswald, Craggle Hill, Haltwhistle Burn, Milking Gap, Sewingshields.

Thus walls rise and walls fall. Hadrian would surely have understood enough

of Stoic philosophy to know that his gift to Britannia was no more (and no less) than a symbol. Say that it belonged to "the grand strategy of the Roman empire" (in Edward

Luttwak's phrase) and Hadrian's Wall becomes, like the great "Ramp" of Masada, a show of strength. By its very transience, redundancy even, the massive system stands for a sort of rational megalomania. Say that it derives from Hadrian's ecumenical extension of Classical values and the wall becomes something else: a projection of the city into wilderness, hot baths among the peat-bogs. Though Goldsworthy does not discuss this, there is some evidence to suggest that the wall was externally rendered in white plaster. If so, it must all the more conspicuously have appeared like some supernatural urban presence among the heather—and not so much an outpost of Rome as of Hadrian's beloved Athens.

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Wilderness prevailed. The tumbled ruins were for many centuries a site of romantic charm, celebrated as such by Walter Scott and others—before the modern tyrannies of "English Heritage" and the kiosks selling homemade fudge. Something of that wood-cut charm can be sensed in the many editions of a *Handbook to the Roman Wall* produced by J. Collingwood Bruce, a Newcastle schoolmaster, in 1863. Bruce prefaced his second edition of 1884 with the sentiment that the Romans had "spread the blessings of order and civilization to the very ends of the earth." He added: "The people of England are in this respect the successors of the Romans," bringing "well organized government" to "vast continents," whose "rude inhabitants" have been given the twin benefits of industry and Christianity. Such faith was of its time. Note, however, the ethnic definition. The wall is claimed as *English*, not British. Though Bruce was born in Glasgow, he evidently considered Scotland, like the Caledonia of the Picts, beyond the pale. And this is the

enduring legacy of Hadrian's Wall. Britannia was bisected; and, as intimated, she is divided still. In 2016 the people of England voted to leave the European Union; the people of Scotland voted to stay.

We sense what they are thinking in Brussels now. *Brittunculi* indeed.

¹ *Hadrian's Wall*, by Adrian Goldsworthy; Basic Books, 192 pages, \$25.

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