

Roman Army School: Newsletter Oct/Nov 2025.

Apologies for the long silence and welcome to a 'Newsletter'; my first (& very personal) attempt so please forgive perhaps a slightly 'amateur' result.

Important News: The 2026 Roman Army School Conference will be held from Friday 27 to Monday 30 March at Collingwood College, Durham, UK.

This year the theme is: The activities of the Emperor Septimius Severus in Britain and beyond.

The initiative for this subject is the excavation of the palatial building at Carlisle dating to about 210, that is within the reign of Severus, by Frank Giecco, who will be one of the speakers. He will be joined by Professor David Breeze, Mark Corby, Dr Nick Hodgson, Professor Rebecca Jones and Martina Meyr. Severus expanded the Roman Empire on three continents and his policies and actions from Scotland to Iraq will be investigated. There will be a visit to the Roman fort at High Rochester on Dere Street, the route of Severus's army into Caledonia.



Booking Details will fairly soon be on the School's website
www.ad43.org.uk.

In the meantime I hope that the following summary of Roman Army School 2025, iwritten by one of our attendees, will be of interest. Whether or not you were able to join us last March, I hope it will feed your interest in things 'Roman Army' and encourage you to join us in Durham in 2026. For those that did make it I hope it will evoke happy memories.

ROMAN ARMY SCHOOL 2025 – ROMAN FRONTIERS IN BRITAIN AND BEYOND

Collingwood College, Durham - Friday 28th to Monday 31st March 2025

I – AN INTRODUCTION TO ROMAN FRONTIERS – D BREEZE

We are about to look at a series of 'frontiers' before the (modern) concept of frontiers had emerged. The problem of drawing lines on maps is that the vision we have of territory is immediately constrained by the line that we see. In the case of Rome its 'reach' went beyond the formal boundaries of the Empire eg Agricola aimed at embracing Thule and in the south the Sahara was penetrated beyond the line of immediate control. Looking at the 'reach' gives a different perspective. Roman frontiers eventually solidified for a range of special reasons but they do not exactly 'match' the Roman world.

The Empire's boundaries were extended by activist generals such as Julius Caesar and Pompey acting on their own initiatives and in this way the Roman state expanded gradually over the decades. But the way that Roman rule was applied differed. The Empire came to include territories of different statuses such as client kings and those in treaty relations. The

key devising figure is, however, Augustus. His efforts pushed and reorganised the problematic frontiers but he did conclude, by the end of his reign, that natural limits were being reached.

Practical boundaries often rested along key rivers such as the Rhine, Danube and Euphrates. Even if they do not neatly separate peoples and tribes they are major definable landscape features. They provided communication and supply routes in a similar way to the role of the Mediterranean at the heart of the Roman world. Some boundaries rested on a political 'block' such as where Roman rule ran up against the long established resistance of the Parthian-Persian kingdom. Augustus hoped to take in Germania but the major disaster of Varus undercut this aim; Legions remained on the Rhine at key points and as possible forces of projection but the key momentum was lost. As a new military threat subsequently emerged further east in Dacia so the military focus shifted.

Large Legionary bases posed problems and dispersal of forces along the Rhine-Danube line gradually took place. A key point is that frontiers were not static: they evolved. Hadrian's Wall is itself incremental – a Wall in advance of the Stanegate and then forts being moved to the line of the wall itself. Perhaps such evolutions reflect different perceptions of the enemy. All the frontiers involved 'installations' devised to fulfil needs across the Empire. The contrast of the Hadrianic and Antonine Walls show key shifts of technique over about 30 years. Late frontier structures in Jordan can be huge in contrast to their earlier predecessors.

Frontiers are not static and reflect local circumstances. Were they real barriers? How impermeable were they? On the Danube there is clear evidence of Roman 'drift' beyond the formal frontier line. We should ask how successful were these frontiers? Not all conflict along them was major but small wars were much more frequent. All these factors need to be taken into account in assessing the 'functions' and 'success' of Roman frontiers.

II – THE BUILDING OF HADRIAN'S WALL: BACKGROUND & THE GREAT DISLOCATION – N HODGSON

To understand Hadrian's Wall and its background the need is to unpick its chronological and constructional sequence. The 'basics' have been established over the past one hundred and fifty years. The topographic setting is a basic element. Three principal areas are defined – (1) the lowlands east of the Portgate (2) the central upland area and (3) the area west of the Irthing Gap into the western lowlands as far as the Solway. The western section was the first built using turf and timber but the whole line of 72 miles is likely to have been surveyed at one go. First steps were foundations and a frontal ditch with broad wall being the starting norm in the east. Milecastles and turrets – uniformly spaced along the whole length - were built early on, mainly with wing walls for the curtain to join although in the west the turrets were free-standing in stone with no wings.

There was soon a major shift in the plan with the decision to build forts actually on the line of the Wall with their placing projecting beyond it. In the east these projecting forts were Wallsend, Benwell, Rudchester, Halton Chesters and Chesters with Birdoswald being the type outlier in the west. Chesters is the classic projecting fort and it overlies an already constructed turret; at Housesteads too an earlier turret was subsumed. There has been much debate over the change in plan to bring forts to the Wall line. It also seems likely that the Vallum was constructed at the same time as the forts were moved to the Wall. It was clearly surveyed to skirt these Wall forts although there is still debate as to whether the decision to build it was exactly at the time Chesters was constructed or slightly later.

The Wall forts that we see today were not all built at the same time; the Housesteads type were likely a later Hadrianic feature. None of the turf sector forts project so are also probably later. It is clear that the projection factor is one of planning and not topography. After the wall-line forts were decided upon broad wall construction continued before later being modified to narrow proportions. It may be that the lowland east was substantially completed in broad wall after the more general shift to narrow gauge. East of Newcastle there is no broad foundation so construction is dated to the later narrow phase. Wallsend has narrow wing walls even though it is a fort that projects from the Wall. The 'transitional' section of the eastern sector eg at Planetrees has particular interest where a six foot wide wall sits on a broad foundation. This looks like a major break in planning and construction and provides a unique disjuncture along the whole Wall line.

At MC38 plans were initially for a broad wall but its neighbour MC37 was adapted to narrow wall. These central sector milecastles capture the shift in planning. The break is likely sudden and probably subsequent to the decision on the projecting forts. Work was disrupted but did not cease. West of the North Tyne the curtain was built to eight foot on a broad foundation. In the central sector the narrow wall as built sometimes deviates from the broad foundation eg at Highfield Crag; perhaps the earlier work was overgrown after a long pause. This narrow wall is later than the fort at Housesteads. Along the Cumbrian coast no clear relationship can be made with the main wall chronology.

What about the historical context? In the 1840s the start date of AD122 was identified. The *Historia Augusta* is the best basis for calculating the time of Hadrian's visit (see E Grafstaal) linked to Governor Platorius Nepos. It is postulated there had been unrest in northern Britain and Nepos (who leaves the province in AD127) supervised the resultant works. In the 1960s C E Stevens made the case (since restated by Grafstaal) that work began (under Governor Falco) before Hadrian's visit and that the Emperor came to see the work in progress and then decided to move the forts to the line of the wall; the Vallum could also date from the Emperor's reappraisal.

In the west the wall was turf because of the greater dangers there (see Grafstaal 2012 Hadrian's Haste). No doubt a later replacement in stone was planned at the outset. Perhaps more work was undertaken under Falco than we sometimes accept and perhaps this early work (dividing the Brigantes) was the cause of the northern unrest and not visa-versa (see the Vindolanda inscription recording a death 'within the fort'). Perhaps too therefore that the dislocation of building techniques was actually related to a frontier war of the early to mid 120s: if the war was ended by AD122 why was there such a long hiatus of construction and shifted styles in the central sector? Related to this may be the recent discovery on urban Tyneside of berm obstacles (stake pits) like those of the Antonine Wall but it is a puzzle as to why such features have not been found further to the west. The wide berm (20 foot) could easily accommodate such features; perhaps these were part of the original broad wall scheme not carried into the narrow phase.

There is, therefore, a long gap between the projection forts and the completion of the central sector. Perhaps this fits with the theory of the 'British expedition/war' linked to Hadrian and a later (wider) war would fit with the burning of London in AD125. The disruption in construction we have identified is most likely linked to major disturbances. Perhaps too this chaos could be linked to the end of the IX Legion which very probably 'disappeared' in Britain. But yet the replacing VI Legion is also linked to an early projection fort (Haltonchesters). The problem, then, is that a definitive date cannot be attributed to the 'great disruption'. We must, therefore keep in mind a number of options linked to building of the Wall beginning both before and after Hadrian's visit.

III – THE BUILDING OF HADRIAN'S WALL: HOW IT WAS DONE & HOW IT UNFOLDED – N HODGSON

Next it is necessary to examine the actual construction of the Wall. It falls into sectors bounded by key rivers eg the Tyne and the Irthing. Stone structures were begun from key points such as the Irthing Gap and the Portgate. Work between the main stone structures began earliest in the west with the turf sector. Overall the plan seems to have been a push in all the sectors prior to the postulated 'disruption' resulting from local (possibly wider) disturbances.

Organisation of the work rested on specialist divisions of labour linked to available skill sets eg foundations, curtain, gates. We know the army had the abilities to do all the work required but perhaps ditching/preparation could have been the lesser skill tasks of local levies/contractors. No single unit would undertake all the tasks in one area. A single Legion took the lead in particular sections but this still allowed for flexibilities. Certain structure 'types' can be discerned within the overall plan. MCs7-22 (the earliest broad wall) has clear five mile sections within it (see Hooley and Breeze 1968). Clear attributions of work would be a spur to gang/legion competition in achieving the end result. There are varying interpretations of these sectoral attributions. The curtain came at the later stage and one Legion (XX based at Chesters) was given the task of completing work from the east to the Irthing (22 to 49 wall miles). Named centuries can be linked to this work; six building stones of centurion Lucianus Savavis (?) are found in the eastern sector. This work was conducted within a relatively tight time frame and by this time too the other two legions had probably completed the related fort and milecastle structures.

The foundations were probably rolled out relatively simply in a major push. But other structure and curtain building was likely undertaken in different sequences in different locations. We do not know how many men from each unit were actually involved. Centurial stones note the basic need for record keeping but not all these are easy to interpret and, sadly, they do not enable analysis of precise dates. Most stones are linked to Hadrian rather than later work. Nevertheless about 200 stones exist and they do provide a major source of evidence. The stones never identify the legions clearly. Linguard's notes (of 1807) show individual sections of broad and narrow wall interleaved; some stones (eg Wall Mile 22) record the cohort of the century concerned. The stones likely record the Wall being built in horizontal layers on the foundation to about head height with scaffolding following to complete to full height. All this means the Wall was probably built in a sequence of full height sections.

Where stone curtain replaced turf west of the Irthing a major tranche of centurial stones exist recording thirty foot lengths which seems to be a standard narrow wall measure. By the late 120s in the central sector work was also undertaken in complete blocks. The replacement with stone of the turf curtain seems to have progressed from west to east (eg see stones for the Wall Miles 45 and 42). It looks very much as though Legion XX worked from west to east in the west and east to west in the east thereby merging work in the central sector around the Irthing gap. Construction probably continued into the

130s. The army could, however, build very quickly when required: for example Josephus records huge fortifications built at high speed during the Jewish War.

Interestingly construction seems to have involved little mortar, at least in the curtain. The central sector probably took longer to complete. The lowland sectors, especially with the turf wall in the west, could have been substantially complete at an early date and so before the postulated 'dislocation' of construction. The post dislocation phase may have been simpler in techniques; the central sector did not need (because of terrain) some elements of the plan such as the northern ditch at Housesteads or the realignment of the post-turf wall at Birdoswald to convert the fort from 'projecting' to 'rearward' position. The replacement of the turf wall west of Birdoswald looks to be Legion IV while Legion XX was at work in the central sector. Evidence of temporary construction camps near the wall exits and in connection with the legionary bases.

IV – THE DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION OF THE ANTONINE WALL – W HANSON

The Antonine Wall is today not a 'surviving wall' in the Hadrianic sense: it is mainly marked by its ditch. The 20th century work on it is dominated by George McDonald and Anne Robertson. They both considered it to be a 'unitary' monument ie conceived and built as one scheme. At 40 miles with forts at 3 to 4 mile intervals it differs in character to Hadrian's Wall. In the 1970s John Gillam challenged the unitary view: he noted varying strategic relations within the Wall postulating that there had been a major shift in plans. The original plan looked something like Hadrian's Wall with primary forts at 6 to 7 mile intervals with smaller forts between. The major shift was to move the major forts onto the wall line itself (see Gillam 1975). To do this new major fort sites were needed such as the one at Croy Hill. Excavations began there in 1975 revealing a fortlet and civil settlement next to the main fort which had been excavated by McDonald in 1934. Work at Seabegs also revealed another fortlet whose site predated the laying out of the Wall itself (see the excavation report of 1977). Also evidence emerged at Cleddans and Kinneil; at Cleddans proved to be a pre-wall site (see reports of 1980). Hence Gillam's theory of variation seemed validated by excavation. But next Poulter and Grafstaal suggested all the forts and fortlets were decided upon at the same time (see BAR 2009). This amounted to a plan that changed rather than two plans.

A response was to reinforce the Gillam theory. At Dunochter the fort actually overlays a fortlet suggesting fortlet, fort and wall in sequence (Robertson 1977). Grafstaal replied with a modification of his challenge. At Croy Hill he postulated a previous fort further east or at least an initial layout for a fortlet but Hanson stuck to the Gillam theory. For example Balmuildy was clearly a primary fort as were Mumrills and Auchendavy. The conclusion has to be that the primary sites were supplemented by secondary forts ie there was a change of plan. Rough Castle was assessed as a secondary addition (revealed by a difference in turf characteristics between the fort walls and the curtain). Inveravon is also proved to be a secondary fort; Castlehill was seen to have a pre-existing fortlet beneath it. At Bearsden the earliest fortlet is not beneath the fort but further west at Boclair near the foundations surviving in the adjacent modern cemetery. Carleith revealed another early fortlet.

The Antonine Wall has excellent survival of distance slabs noting the work on a 'vallum' (rampart) including details of the units involved. Most slabs come from the western sector running to the Clyde (eg Dalnotter and Summerston). The slabs can be used to show that pre-existing structures were deducted from the later assessments of the total lengths constructed. All this reinforces the existence of primary and secondary forts. Hassall's hypothesis is that the central sector (about 20 miles) was constructed first but this has been challenged in order to fit with the assessment of the Wall overall. The current evidence is that Gillam was correct in giving it Hadrianic antecedents with a change during construction to a more heavily fortified mural barrier than originally planned. The aim was to establish a harder border than originally conceived.

V – HADRIAN'S & THE ANTONINE WALLS IN THEIR MILITARY LANDSCAPE SETTINGS – M SYMONDS

An assessment of the 'threat' in the frontier region is needed. What was it? Where? What is the sequence of response? What is the relationship between locals and the incomers? We need to start with a 'classic' depiction of the Wall system – curtain, vallum, Stanegate, forts and so on. But the landscape itself is a crucial factor in its impact on any 'standard' approach to building military structures. The Roman 'regular' approach is, nevertheless, saying that local factors are in a real sense irrelevant. This needs challenging by a landscape analysis (eg Woolliscroft). David Mann (1990) noted a regular scheme is not a logical project: his answer was that the Wall is a gigantic Imperial Statement, possibly promulgated by Hadrian himself.

Militarily the Wall is not 'normal'. Look instead at what is the normal pattern of forts/fortlets in Britain – small structures placed in the landscape for specific purposes to be more flexible and responsive. These are not home bases but embed forces locally in bespoke ways according to need eg at Bowness a fortlet sits at the lowest crossing point of the Solway. They were also occupied in shorter term ways and did not become fossilised in form, function and location. Longer term British fortlets are found in upland areas for the whole period. Concentrations are in south-west Scotland and in Wales and later along the

eastern shores. Overall the Roman army is being shown as responsive and flexible in the local landscape. There are some classic examples eg the Antonine fortlet at Durisdeer. The development of fortlets could also have a demonstration/deterrent effect.

Turning to the two Walls it is clear that both are the shortest cross-isthmus lines in two very convenient east-west corridors. On Hadrian's Wall the Irthing Gap is the only north-south passage avoiding a major river along its length. Hadrian's Wall cuts across a major area of agricultural settlement involving many thousands of people. What did they think of its impact on their mobility? Mixed farming communities mean movement and links over considerable areas and this would all have been impacted by the Wall system. Because Roman military planning is usually responsive and flexible and geared to mobility and open battlefields, Hadrian's Wall is very unusual. For example compare it, a complex fixed structure, to the German Limes, a simpler fence line. Why is the Wall a different concept?

Modern scholarship downplays the military abilities of the Britons eg Boudicca's Revolt and Mons Graupius. But is this true? In Wales Iron Age and guerilla warfare posed major resistance to Roman power. Wales received a sophisticated structure of forts/fortlets in response to mobile low key resistance that was initially successful (see Tacitus Annals 12-38 and Agricola 18). It has been suggested that the Welsh system was new but Caesar (in Gallic Wars 5, 15-16) talked of British irregular/guerilla challenges to formal forces. In the south it was possible to target key native centres such as Wheathampstead but such centres did not much exist in the north. The Welsh system is also seen on the Gask Ridge presumably against small scale mobile resistance (see Tacitus Agricola 25-26). The Stanegate was perhaps a first attempt to tackle this mobile resistance in the north (see Vindolanda Tablets 164) but it was not successful. The problems of mobile forces was behind the more rigid but comprehensive cutting of the peninsula with hard barriers. The various amendments to both Walls underlines how Roman military planners were constantly adapting a fixed scheme of division to the actual reality of control. Woolliscroft shows how the 'regular' pattern of structures on Hadrian's Wall was in fact amended to avoid 'blind spots' and the turrets became the best means of playing fast and loose with the overall planned system. Both Walls show this constant local adaptation. On Hadrian's Wall the Irthing Gap has a major concentration of fortlets. Also in the western sector towards Carlisle and Dumfries and Galloway was dominated by a network of small routes dominated by poor weather. To the south of the Wall the Northern Pennines have to be contained by roads and forts. Uplands have vital passes long under local power brokers and these needed supervision and control. A classic pass-blocker is the fort at Hardknott; also Ambleside has recently revealed slingshot defences in response to attack.

All this suggests a constant level of disruption in the period pivoting on AD 122 in the vicinity of Hadrian's Wall. A Jarrow inscription talks of barbarians being 'dispersed' rather than defeated. In the west Burnswark could underline the point of major disturbance and is a possible key native centre like Wheathampstead. The western sector also has the best network of outpost forts (Bewcastle etc) and perhaps it suggests the approach of Kitchener's blockhouses in the Second Boer War. The same fortlets approach is pivoted around the Antonine Wall, especially in Annandale and Nithsdale. The fortlets of this area are unusual in having more prominent advance defences eg in blocking gateways to prevent rush attacks. This could well be down to local commanders responding to local circumstances eg the bigger than usual ditches at Durisdeer; in Tacitus (Agricola 17) Frontinus surmounts not just the enemy but also the landscape.

And the distance slabs from Kilpatrick show Victory as a river goddess in deference to the importance of the Clyde. It is always important to remember that the local populations will have reacted to, not just received, the Roman advance.

VI – THE FRONTIER IN GERMANY – D BREEZE

Taking the classic historical atlas depictions there is still scope to redefine the frontiers of the Roman Empire. Germany and the Netherlands are cases in point. The Rhine Delta has fascinations of its own coupled with a land frontier running until the Danube is reached. Roman influence certainly spread beyond the formal frontier lines; under Augustus the Elbe was reached eg a town was founded at Waldgrimes which was lost after the defeat of Varus after which Roman ambitions of further expansion were de facto ended. In Britain too the frontiers were subject to fluctuation and problems on the continent often sharpened these movements. In the north Caesar reached the Rhine and Augustus went beyond; Britain was taken and Vespasian, Domitian and Antoninus all moved to add territory until a fall-back came in the AD 260s.

Despite the Varus disaster the literature tells us that there were still Roman troops stationed beyond the Rhine in the AD 40s though Claudius wished to pull back to the river. Around Utrecht timber towers were being built and bounded by a road to control cross-river access. Caligula had been exploring options in Britain and it was to this that Claudius returned in preference to cross Rhine control. In the area of the present Netherlands, therefore, frontier policy was designed to secure control of the Channel ports to protect links to Britain. As a result the intensity of forts increased in this coastal-delta area. These structures are not, however, 'normal' forts. They are reduced facility installations on non-standard plans underlining both the army's ability to improvise and the incremental nature of development on the frontiers.

In Upper Germany the incrementality is more compressed similar to on the Antonine Wall. Most territory here was taken under Domitian (AD 81-96). There were problems with the loss of two armies on the Rhine frontier and Domitian had to visit. At Saalburg a mountain pass came to be controlled by a network of small forts similar to the position around Durisdeer: the main forts are to the rear. Interestingly when new forts were built Domitian paid compensation to the affected farmers, the only such reference we have. These small forts were soon supplemented by towers, probably early under Trajan (eg Mahdhotz). Might this also be linked to the preventative defence at a time of advance across the Stanegate in Britain? The fortlets are intriguing with doors above ground level (see Limes Commission Reports of the 1890s) These towers too were soon supplemented by a pallisade then the towers were replaced in stone and the pallisade with an earthen bank. Hadrian visited the German frontier in about AD 121 and he probably authorised the pallisade although the trees had already been felled (dendro-dating) ie he requests in advance and then personally inspects. Today the line of pallisade, (built of hefty timbers) and bank remains a clear landscape feature. Gradually the forts were replaced in stone and took on a more 'typical' pattern; rebuilding probably took about six years.

Further east in Raetia/Bavaria a river-and-land frontier continues east until the Danube is reached. Here the forts were constructed first with other features following because there was confidence in the army's control. Adjustments were made eg under Antoninus Pius a relatively eastward shift of the frontier was made but we do not know why. Deployments may have had a special cavalry component with legions to the rear, Cavalry often sits on the major roads as is seen on Hadrian's Wall and in its hinterland. The German Antonine frontier had regular patterns on units but also units plus cavalry as back up for wider deployments ie mobility was more important than static defence. An inscription from Budapest under Commodus (AD 180-196) tells us towers and forts are built to deal with 'bandits' across the frontier. The frontier also involved document checking at specific points for specific destinations under military supervision. There was also tribal differentiation as to who could come in and who could not illustrating that there was regular movement across the frontier. Normally conditions were relatively quiet but occasionally the frontier was substantially attacked; raiding was normal but not usually critical. In Egypt evidence exists of warnings between forts of pending small scale raids; no doubt it was the same here.

VII – THE VAL IUI TRAJAN: A LOST ROMAN FRONTIER IN ROMANIA – W HANSON

The Dacian frontier is not so much lost as neglected. The area considered below is inland from Constanza on the Black Sea; it is a flat arable plain along the Carasu valley and is similar in length to the 40 mile length of the Antonine Wall. Its Roman features have been little studied. In 1900 Tocilescu published an initial survey of the frontier line which survived as an earthen bank. In 1918 Schuchardt produced another study of what had become 'Trajan's Rampart'. This latter study included the earliest ever aerial photographs of a Roman frontier (see Hanson and Oltean 2005-13).

The frontier has a small earth wall, a large earth wall and, finally, a stone wall. The first small earth wall has no fortifications. The second larger earth rampart has a ditch to the north of about 10 foot depth plus 35 forts at irregular intervals (mostly attached) along its length, each of between 3 and 9 acres. The large earth rampart also has about 30 fortlets attached to its rear face. A major problem is that we do not understand the chronology of these structures as they are truncated by a subsequent ditch to the south. The stone wall follows a similar alignment to those of earth. This wall was not free standing but was tucked into the earthen structures; it also has a 12 foot ditch. The stone wall has 26 or 27 forts attached these being generally more widely spaced than on the large earth wall and are of larger size of 4 to 8 and even 17 acres.

Can we say that all this work is of Trajanic date? Is it all the same date? There has been no systematic examination of dating material and the Romanian bias of explanation is towards Byzantine/early Medieval attribution. The most recent excavations date to 1917 (!). Pottery samples from these could be 2nd to 3rd century AD. Much much more work is needed but the Romanian authorities remain little engaged. Logically the chronology has to be complex and cover a long period eg some stone forts seem to have acquired later bastions. The overlapping structures give a very complex picture. Reworking and reuse at a later date complicates things even more! There is also the problem that we know of other Roman fortifications further to the north. It is just not clear how this fits in: possibly to the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD? The region contains a major land route – the Carpathian Corridor – which could have spawned shifts in the frontier at various times. Also, typically, linear barriers are not necessarily the limits of actual control. There are historical contexts from c180-220 AD which could underpin such shifts. The best guess is that the earthen structures are mid 2nd century and the stone features mid 3rd century AD. Much much more still needs to be unravelled.

VIII – FRONTIERS: AN OVERVIEW – D BREEZE

We have seen that, in practice, there are several types of frontier although many key features are shared in common. Evidence from across the Empire – from Vindolanda tablets to Egyptian papyri – show both common features and key variations. Our perceptions are usually dominated by ‘heavy landscape’ frontiers such as the central sector of Hadrian’s Wall. But we must not neglect the ‘lighter’ zones such as found at Heddon-on-the-Wall. The Antonine Wall also has a very mixed make up and much of its line sits in relatively modest landscapes overlooking a broad flat rift adjacent to the Campsie Fells.

Roman sources have traditionally claimed that ‘Empire stopped at the sea’ – or perhaps more broadly interpreted as bounded by water. The ‘sea’ had had initial logic but this view was changed by circumstances as Empire expanded to rely on other major features such as the Rhine and the deserts of North Africa. Big rivers generally had few installations at first though this did change as pressure on their lines increased; the same logic can be applied to Britannia’s Saxon Shore. The southern (African) desert frontier was generally bounded by roads supervised by passes to travel and tolls (evidenced by inscriptions). In eastern Jordan the frontier was marked by the de-facto limit of agricultural activity which lapped the desert margins. Within the deserts there were oases along the key routes and these had fortlets to supervise passing traffic (eg in Syria and at Gass Bashir in Jordan) supported by water management schemes (eg cisterns). On Hadrian’s Wall water also looms large: for instance is the detailed positioning of Chesters, a key fort, moored significantly by the River Tyne? But Great Chesters is not so influenced underling that tactical positioning has to prevail. Marsh landscapes could be both positive and negative eg in areas north of the Antonine Wall they provided defence but also inhibited the deployment of cavalry.

Heavy landscape in mountains were also important frontier factors eg in Dacia/Carpathia. Peaks could provide key observations spots that support/overlook linear frontiers. Frontiers have to ‘look’ out; for example the Antonine Wall can see much further north than it can south. But they could also interrupt the aim for consolidated control eg where the Atlas mountains reach the north African coast and break the easy control of the coastline itself.

The standard concept of the frontier necessarily has variation through circumstance. The eastern coast of the Black Sea provides a particular example where Rome’s control rested on a range of Greek founded cities. There is evidence of garrisons to protect the local inhabitants and also contact in the hinterland with local tribal leaders and kings probably beyond formal Roman control. From the 160s AD this area becomes much more prone to the depredations of piracy (see Aricus).

Frontier defence also involved placing forts on potential invasion routes. Siting these needed the accumulation of local knowledge as well as fundamental tactical sense eg deployments such as along the Gask Ridge. Roman planning certainly involved organised exploration such as the investigation of the Red Sea area under Augustus.

Frontiers later in the Empire become much more monumental eg the Forts of the Saxon Shore. This must reflect a shift in the type of enemy confronted though some aspects remain constant such as the need for ‘eyes’ shown by the small Yorkshire signal stations of the Saxon Shore. On the Danube forts came late, especially amidst the best farm land, following the steady increase of pressure on the frontier line. The later frontiers also seem to have become more fossilised as it became more difficult to move Legions around and deployments between east and west became more tricky. Often ‘detachments’ of forces was seen as a solution to this increased rigidity eg in SE Europe and the reorganisation under Diocletian’s dynamic rule created a new structure of Field Armies to respond where static defence could no longer cope.

(NB – This session in place of G Sumner – What the soldiers wore on the British frontiers)

David Howlett 2025

Other Army Snippets (culled from a range of published sources (most fairly recent):

(These are neither exhaustive, nor do I claim them necessarily to be the 'last, best' word on any topic but do flag up development and themes and how older aspects are re-visited and re-assessed as new discoveries are made).

Antonine Wall. 'Return to Normalcy? Building Materials & the Making of the Antonine Wall.

Erik P. Graafstal, Utrecht, Netherlands: *Archaeological Journal* 2024, vol 181; p3-31.

This paper by another well-known Roman fortifications specialist is especially interesting.

Roman Frontier Towers

'*Current World Archaeology*' (sister magazine) in May 2025 had an authoritative 8 page article by several authors headed by Professor David Breeze with Christof Fluegel, Erik Graafstal and others discussing current thoughts. (A 'must read' if not already seen).

Roman Empire's Borders.

Current World Archaeology in July 2024 carried an overview by David Breeze highlighting how the Empire's frontiers have been 'chronicled' by David and the multi-national team of experts and their output through the brilliant series of booklets, also available in 'e' / pdf form.

These booklets are essential sources for this vital topic.

Maiden Castle Casualties: Battle or?.

The Council for British Archaeology's *British Archaeology*, October 2025 mentions the re-assessment, using modern scientific methods the bodies found at Maiden Castle and in the 1930s ascribed to Vespasian's II Augusta western thrust. The full article is available as an 'Open Access' item in the *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*.

'Spartacus & His Revolt.

'*BBC History*' in June 2025 had an article with an overview on this topic by Guy de la Bedoyere.

Ancient Warfare This fairly long running magazine series 'routinely covers Roman topics which, while not necessarily at the cutting edge of latest academic research, do throw up some interesting points plus coverage of wider publication on the subjects highlighted.

In addition the magazine notes – as do all the previous publications – recent archaeological finds across the world with Roman camps in the Netherlands & Georgia, equipment items: swords, helmets and mail etc. all featuring; usually with details of the publication carrying the fuller details. One such example is brief coverage of a mass of ?3rd century? Roman mail at *Bonna* in Germany; details published in *Antiquity*, 2024.

Roman ‘Battle Groups’. Slightly older but of particular interest to me, given my family connections, is the January 2025 coverage in *Current World Archaeology* of Swiss archaeological work in the mountain areas of the Grisons in the east of the country where military items over 3,000 in all including some 450 slingshots -some with legionary markings – which suggest the progress through the area of what is termed ‘battlegroups’ whose initial camp site further to the south at the Septimer Pass has been established.

More Slingshots. Continuing on the ‘Slingshots’ theme, while tidying up I found a much older *Current Archaeology* from July 2016 with an article on ‘Burnswark’ and the results of the earlier research. Then it was summarised as having at least two different explanations: the ‘assault’ theme or Roman projectile weapons training site.

To my satisfaction the article ended by saying: *‘.....The sparse dating evidence leaves both scenarios possible. With these thoughts in mind we plan further ...investigations...to [try!] and unravel this enigmatic site’s mysteries’.*

As a cautious (cynic) I particularly like the (initial) resistance here to plump for the more sensational (and marketable?) local resistance to Roman invasion theme. However my cynicism on the desire for locals active in resisting the ‘invaders’ has to acknowledge further research set out in the *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 32 (2019).

Summary

All such journals and magazines and websites such as those listed on the Roman Army School’s website and locatable through web searches discuss published literature both older but still relevant, and more recent plus coverage of – alas sometimes time-expired – exhibitions.

Finally I’d mention that belatedly I’ve discovered how many archaeological digs and sites have video clips etc on both Youtube and on Facebook: I just wish I had time to follow these up!

STOP PRESS

See the super news about the new stretch of wall at Dumburgh:

[Section of Hadrian's Wall uncovered at Drumburgh in dig | News and Star ,](#)
[Hadrian's Wall section discovered in Drumburgh dig - BBC News](#)

Best wishes to all,

John Harding for Roman Army School
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