

## Q Lollius Urbicus and A Claudius Charax, Antonine commanders in Britain

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### ABSTRACT

*The appointment of A Claudius Charax of Pergamum to command legion II Augusta during the Antonine advance into north Britain may have resulted from earlier contact with the Emperor Antoninus Pius when the latter was proconsul of Asia.*

Until 1974 reasons offered for the advance into Scotland in the early 140s related to the local political, military or geographical situation in north Britain. Thus, Hadrian's Wall was a success but in the wrong position as it was too far removed from the main enemy in the north, the Caledonians (Gillam 1958, 66–7); an uprising by the tribes of the Southern Uplands, probably that mentioned in a garbled account by Pausanias (*Description of Greece* 8, 43, 3–4), led to the advance north and the incorporation of their territory into the empire (Steer 1964, 19–21): to these 'local explanations' can now be added the suggestion that the advance was governed by a desire to bring the fertile farmland of the Lothians back into the empire (Hanson & Maxwell 1983, 68–9). In 1974 Professor A R Birley offered an alternative explanation, namely that 'Antoninus' authorization of the advance northwards [was] a sop thrown to the marshals, the *militares viri*, whose ambitions had been thwarted for more than twenty years [for] Antoninus must have needed to conciliate these men in the tense moments after his accession' (Birley 1974, 17). Birley also noted that 'the northward advance in Britain, in the context of the reign as a whole, appears as a kind of aberration' (Birley 1974, 18). Indeed, this was the only occasion during his very long reign that Antoninus Pius was to accept the title of Imperator – Conqueror – after his adoption by Hadrian, in spite of the forward movement of the frontier in Upper Germany, the suppression of a major revolt in Mauretania and other disturbances in Dacia and on the north-eastern frontier.

Stimulated by Anthony Birley's suggestion I took up the problem two years later and offered a somewhat different – though still political – explanation (Breeze 1976, 76). Antoninus Pius was not Hadrian's first choice to succeed him. His first nomination died on 1 January 138 and, after careful consideration, Hadrian then chose Antoninus Pius. In so doing he passed over some of his own relatives. Hadrian's eyes seem to have been on the next-but-one emperor, the man who is known to us as Marcus Aurelius, but who was too young to succeed in 138. In choosing Antoninus Pius as the stop-gap Hadrian also passed over some of Marcus' relations who might have thought that they had as good a claim as Antoninus Pius, Marcus' uncle-in-law. Antoninus Pius clearly had something to offer Hadrian and it was

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obviously not military experience because such men were ignored by Hadrian: these included Catilius Severus, one of Trajan's marshals, and Marcus' step-grandfather (Birley 1966, 53–4; 1974, 17). By contrast, Antoninus Pius had never served in the army and had only been out of Italy once, to serve for one year as proconsul of the province of Asia (Birley 1966, 52–3). His only other known appointment was as one of the four consulars appointed by Hadrian to administer Italy, a new post and of a prestigious nature. Interestingly Antoninus Pius' area was located where he held property himself, which perhaps gives an indication of how the post was regarded: an appropriate honour for a major landowner. The proconsulship of Asia is particularly instructive. This appointment was frequently only given to senators after a long career in the imperial service (compare the case of Agricola: Tacitus, *Agricola* 42). Antoninus Pius had not undertaken such a career and it seems more likely that he was made proconsul of Asia as a mark of honour rather than in relation to any administrative experience (*pace* Hanson & Maxwell 1983, 60). While it would be going too far to suggest that either post was a sinecure they were nevertheless not onerous appointments. In fact, in many ways they direct our attention to the reason for Hadrian's choice. In Antoninus Pius he selected a man who, because he had no political or military ambitions, could be trusted to continue Hadrian's foreign and frontier policies (Birley 1974, 17), as indeed he did – with the essential exception of Britain.

One vital point about the advance north is its date. Rebuilding began at Corbridge on Dere Street in 139 (*RIB* 1147). Corbridge was an important fort on the road north and activity there, which continued into the next year, can best be interpreted as relating to the advance north. Hadrian died on 10 July 138. Thus the decision to re-conquer southern Scotland must have been made within months of his death for it to have been implemented in the following season.

The decision to advance northwards in Britain was thus taken soon after Antoninus Pius became emperor: it was the only time that Pius accepted the acclamation Imperator; it was the only expansion of any note to the empire during his long reign; and it was a significant step because it publicly marked a break with the policies of his adoptive father, Hadrian, and an ostensible rejection of the reasons for his choice as emperor. It has even been suggested that the density of the military occupation of southern Scotland in the early Antonine period was in order to ensure that nothing untoward happened to mar the success of Antoninus Pius' triumph (Breeze 1980, 52–3). The decision to move north could not have been undertaken lightly, but only for a most important reason. Brian Dobson has suggested that the crucial point and the reason for the re-conquest of southern Scotland was that Antoninus Pius required military prestige in order to secure his accession: such prestige was very important in a military dictatorship and especially to a man who had none (Breeze 1976, 76).

The man chosen by Antoninus Pius to lead the operations in Britain was Quintus Lollius Urbicus. Urbicus was in Britain by 139 and is attested in the *Life of Pius* as the general who led the advance, while he is also recorded building on the Antonine Wall (*RIB* 1147, *Life of Antoninus Pius* 5, 4, *RIB* 1291). Urbicus had served in the Jewish War of 132–5 and he came to the governorship of Britain from Lower Germany, a not unusual move (Birley 1981, 114). The only other senior officer we know serving in Britain at this time was A Claudius Charax, legate of II Augusta, the man who may have been portrayed making the sacrifice on the Bridgeness distance slab (Birley 1990, 18). Unlike Urbicus, Charax was not a military man. He was a Greek, a native of Pergamum in the province of Asia, and an historian (Birley 1981, 250–1). Birley has commented that 'it is rather puzzling to find a man with no previous military experience and no service in a western province (for Sicily [where Charax had served as

quaestor] was largely Greek) commanding a legion at this very time' (Birley 1990, 18; cf Birley 1981, 250). If, however, the re-conquest of southern Scotland was undertaken for political reasons then perhaps the generals were specially chosen, perhaps as a mark of honour to themselves. After all, the move north cannot have been a major military operation. The area over-run had been already conquered by Agricola 60 years before – and easily too (Tacitus, *Agricola* 22) – and although abandoned about 10 years later must have been under Roman surveillance since: while we cannot point to any treaties between Rome and the northern tribes at this time, at the end of the second century there were treaties between the Romans and the Caledonians and the Maeatae (Cassius Dio, 75, 5, 4). In these circumstances military experience may not have been regarded as an essential prerequisite for command of a legion: in any case there was no lack of military experience with Urbicus present.

If Charax was selected by Antoninus Pius to take part in this special operation as a personal mark of esteem then a connection between the two men has to be sought. Such a connection is not hard to find. Charax's home city of Pergamum lies within the province of Asia where the emperor had served as proconsul only five years before in 134–5. Perhaps the two had met there. Pergamum was one of the most important cities in the province of Asia – it had been the capital of the Attalid kingdom – and it might be expected that it would have been visited by the proconsul. Charax was an important man in his home city, just the sort of local dignitary which the proconsul would have met. Charax had also seen service as curator of the Via Latina in Italy, and while this seems a less likely occasion for the two men to have met, it may be noted that Antoninus Pius' favourite home was his villa at Lanuvium, his birthplace, on the Via Appia, but only 10 miles as the crow flies from the Via Latina.

Such a connection between Antoninus Pius and Claudius Charax may seem far-fetched, but it must be remembered that the aristocracy of the Roman empire was relatively small and its members would have known each other – or known of each other – while it was a society which relied heavily upon personal contacts and patronage. Such another link may be postulated. Lollius Urbicus came from north Africa, being born close to Cirta (modern Constantine), the city of Cornelius Fronto, tutor to Marcus Aurelius. While not decrying the military experience of Urbicus, it is nevertheless possible that the personal link between him and Fronto played a part in his choice to lead the advance in north Britain as Birley (1981, 114) has suggested; Birley has also suggested that the former governor of Britain, Sex Julius Severus, Urbicus' commanding officer in the Jewish War, may have played a part in his selection (Birley 1981, 114). Thus it seems possible that Antoninus Pius carefully chose men of his own acquaintance for the honour of participating in the event which was undertaken with the express purpose of achieving for him military prestige and thereby ensuring his unchallenged succession.

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