

ART. V.—*The Vallum again.* By JOHN MORRIS.

Read at Lancaster, September 14th, 1949.

THE Centenary Pilgrimage of Hadrian's Wall in July 1949 was a week of infinite delight for the strangers who were privileged to take part in it, and not least to the strangers from southern England. The delight was not only due to the kindness of our hosts, to the lure of the Wall itself, or even to our admiration for the tremendous achievements of the last twenty years' work by the northern archæologists. The results of this work have given an authoritative answer, likely to survive future discoveries, to a whole series of outstanding archæological and historical problems; but, like all answers, they have raised new and wider questions—and it is these questions which excite and please the visitor. The following note is a thank-offering from a southern pilgrim to those in the north whose work has made it possible to pose the problem here discussed.

The most striking achievement of the work of the last few decades has been to establish and date the structural sequence of the frontier works. Briefly summarised, Hadrian built a Wall from sea to sea, in stone for two thirds of its length, with a ditch to the north and another to the south; but in the course of the building, a number of important modifications were made to the original plan, the most puzzling of them being the addition of the southern ditch, usually called the Vallum by British archæologists. This addition was both planned and made quite late in the Wall construction programme. It is a formidable obstacle, impossible for man or horse to cross except at the guarded causeways, provided where

branch roads led to forts and milecastles. It is much too elaborate to be no more than a juridical frontier or a customs barrier, though no doubt it might have served both of those purposes. On the other hand, it is scarcely a military defence-work, designed to protect the Wall from armed attack in the rear. Its irregular course is often far too near the Wall; and neither the siting, nor the construction, nor the equipment of the southern or northern mounds of the Vallum at all suggests an operational defence-work. The problem of its purpose cannot be solved by archæology alone; the interpretation of what has been revealed by field-survey and excavation must be sought in the frontier-policy of Domitian, Trajan and Hadrian.

The celebrated maxim "Divide and rule" is not the casual reproach of a witty cynic; it was the basic principle of Roman foreign policy, as fundamental to the maintenance of the empire as was its later adaptation, the "Balance of Power", to British policy in recent centuries. Tacitus, writing under Trajan, was acutely conscious of this principle; "if foreigners be not our friends", he wrote, "then let them be enemies to one another . . . the greatest gift of fortune is the discord of our enemies";¹ and elsewhere he gives a score of instances of such discord. The military strategy of the early empire was geared upon the expectation that Rome's enemies would attack singly and in isolation, and each sector of the frontier was equipped to resist the peoples who fronted it. The Roman government ever feared the possibility of a combination of enemies; it faced such a powerful *conspiratio barbarorum*² in the middle of the second century—and the ensuing war was the longest and most costly since the defeat of Hannibal four centuries before: it was at once the last of the great European frontier campaigns of the principate, and the first of the massed

¹ Tacitus, *Germania* 33.

² S. H. A. *Marcus* 22, 1.

assaults which the later empire endured. As the barbarians learnt to unite and concentrate their striking power, the old defence of a frontier line became outmoded, and a mobile reserve had to be established, to reinforce the areas threatened by such a concentration. When Rome ceased to be able to divide her enemies, she found herself divided. But the conscious effort to divide her enemies always dominated her policy.

To encourage discord, in the direct and simple form that struck Tacitus, was the most obvious way of dividing the enemy. But it was not the only one. The time-honoured policy of the "buffer state" or, more properly, the dependent ally—exemplified in Britain by Cogidubnus, king (in Sussex at least) and legate (probably in a wider area of the south-east of Britain)³—meant detaching one barbarian people from its neighbours, rewarding its loyalty, and giving it a vested interest in Roman rule. Moreover, within each people, Rome saw to the creation of a pro-Roman party. In the civilised East, Rome ruled by and through the established timocracies or aristocracies within each state. In Britain, Caesar emphasizes that the *principes* blamed the *multitudo* for their opposition to Rome,⁴ and for a century to come the *principes* restrained that opposition. After the Claudian invasion, a pro-Roman policy brought wealth and prosperity to Cartimandua, but Venutius in 69 was still able to rally her people against her by an appeal to resistance against the Roman.⁵ Ten years later it was to the sons of *principes* that Agricola gave the benefits of the Latin tongue and a liberal education, while in building *templa, fora, domos* he can hardly have been providing direct benefits for more than a minority of the population, though they were undoubtedly paid for out of the taxes and tribute of a

³ CIL vii 11 and Tacitus, *Agricola* 14.

⁴ *De bello Gallico* iv 27.

⁵ Tacitus, *Histories* iii 45, cf. *Annals* xii 40.

majority of rural dwellers.⁶ It is evident that in Britain, as elsewhere, Roman rule served to widen the gap between *principes* and *multitudo*, to exalt the mighty and to put down the lowly, and to provide the leading citizens with solid reasons for supporting Roman rule.

I have given some space to these varying methods of dividing barbarians because they are relevant to the problems which faced both Agricola and Hadrian in northern Britain. But there is an important modification of Roman frontier strategy, proper to their own times, which must concern us first. Until the reign of Augustus, both the Roman state and the civilisation of classical, Mediterranean antiquity had been continuously, if unevenly, expanding over ever wider territories. The conquests immediately foreseen on the northern frontiers were Britain and an extension to the Elbe and the Carpathians (and ultimately, presumably, to the Baltic). The Pannonian revolt and the defeat of Varus in Westphalia in A.D. 9 put an end to these plans, and Augustus is reported to have commended a permanent frontier on Rhine, Danube and Euphrates, and an end to further conquest. But not every Roman was convinced that Greco-Roman civilisation had ceased to expand. At the close of Marcus Aurelius's wars in A.D. 180 Claudius Pompeianus, his senior general, still dreamed of extending the bounds of empire to the shores of the (Baltic) ocean.⁷ Pompeianus was demanding expansion because it was no longer possible to hold the old river line in the old way; after nearly two centuries of a fixed frontier, the enemy had learnt much of Roman military skill and, above all, had learnt to unite.

Domitian had to face successive campaigns on the lower Rhine, the upper Danube and the lower Danube; the danger of Rome's enemies making common cause was

⁶ Cf. Tacitus, *Agricola* 21.

⁷ Herodian i, 5, 6. Commodus delivered the speech, but Pompeianus was certainly its author.

more real than it had been under his predecessors. Domitian initiated a series of slow and methodical frontier rectifications: first a great salient on the lower Main, with (later) the southern German *limes*, from the Main to Regensburg. One of the effects of this new frontier line was effectually to separate lower Rhine, upper Rhine and upper Danube from one another. The acquisition of the great bastion of Dacia was left to Trajan; but its effect was to separate the Germans of the upper and middle Danube, with a section of the Sarmatians, from the main body of the Sarmatian peoples on and beyond the lower Danube, a task which free Dacia had failed to perform. In the bitter fighting of 170, the hardest battles were fought in Dacia; here several Roman armies with their commanders were lost, before the bastion was held. If it had not been held, the whole of the Balkans must surely have fallen, exposed to Germanic raids as they were when the province was abandoned a century later. One of the functions of all these frontier modifications was to prevent effective collaboration between barbarian enemies. Equally striking is the effect of the *fossatum Africae*, the Numidian frontier work (which may well be Hadrianic) recently discovered by Colonel Jean Baradez. Running at right angles to the line of the valleys, this wall not merely bars the approach of enemy raiders; it also cuts across the lines of seasonal migration—the nomads pasture their flocks in winter in the desert, but in summer seek water on the plateau on the Roman side of the frontier: the wall forced them either to settle within Roman territory, or to remove permanently far from the new *limes*, or to subject their whole economy to Roman control. This wall, by dividing the enemy, created a frontier where none had been before; it also gave to the peoples of the frontier zone a solid material incentive for a pro-Roman policy.

This was one of the great principles of frontier strategy

which the Roman government applied between A.D. 70 and 120. It was no longer sufficient to overawe the enemy by fronting him with a massive wall of legions. It was necessary to carve up and segment the barbarian territory in front of the legions, to hamper the enemy's communications. This was a principle which both Agricola and Hadrian brought with them to Britain.

In essence, the situation which Agricola inherited was dictated by geography. The Roman armies had subdued the lowlands, but had as yet done no more than raid the highland zone; the problem was to consolidate the lowlands and to provide for their efficient defence: so long as the Pennines remained untamed, the romanisation of the lowlands was insecure. Agricola's answer was to "surround conquered *civitates* with garrisons and forts";⁸ the hill country was hemmed in by the roads from Chester to Carlisle and from Lincoln to Corbridge or Newcastle, and cut across by the east-west lines Lincoln-Derby-Chester, York-Manchester, York-Ilkley-Lancaster, Catterick-Stainmore-Carlisle and Newcastle-Carlisle. The latter line, on which Hadrian later built the Wall, is described by later writers⁹ as separating Romans from barbarians. This description was of course true of the third and fourth centuries; the effect of the *limes* was to make Romans of those who lived within it. But it was scarcely the purpose of the Wall when Hadrian built it, still less of the Stanegate in the eyes of Agricola. I know of no evidence, literary or archæological, to suggest that at this time the Tyne-Solway line formed the northern limit of Brigantian power. Indeed, Venutius in 69 was able to summon not only the Brigantes themselves but also *auxilia* to his cause; those *auxilia*—allies—can hardly have come from the south, already securely occupied by Rome; if they came from

⁸ Tacitus, *Agricola* 20.

⁹ S. H. A. *Hadrian* 11, 2; Dio lxxii 8, 2 (probably referring, however, to the Antonine Wall in Scotland).

the north, they must surely indicate Brigantian hegemony over at least a part of the area north of the Stanegate. Agricola intended the conquest of the whole of Britain; the Stanegate line was not meant for a permanent frontier, nor was it the line of a pre-existing ethnic boundary: it was simply a line of consolidation, geographically and militarily convenient. But neither Agricola nor his successors could proceed to the complete conquest of Scotland, and the Stanegate became by degrees a frontier *de facto*, gradually differentiating the barbarians behind it from those before.

Early in Hadrian's reign there was very serious fighting in Britain, and in 122 he began the construction of the Wall. A continuous Wall now replaced the frontier road. The decisions of the Roman general staff, as of any other staff, were normally prompted by the experiences of the past, and especially of the recent past. It is the custom of military commands to prepare for the last war rather than to gamble on an anticipation of the next. The need for a continuous Wall looks like the answer to some problem raised by recent events—though the events need not have been local to Britain, for a continuous wall was now provided in Upper Germany and probably in Numidia also.

Professor Richmond has convincingly shown the tactical function of Hadrian's Wall: through large and ample gateways cavalry were able to issue at speed, to get between the enemy concentration and his rear, and to drive him against the Wall, as herdsman corral cattle. The problem which these tactics meet is the familiar one that faced all would-be conquerors of Scotland or indeed of any mountainous land; the enemy fights as the Spanish guerillas fought Napoleon, or as the Balkan partisans fought Hitler: he attacks the invaders' communications and individual garrisons; when faced by superior numbers he melts away and reforms elsewhere, leaving the organised divisions to the fog and the marsh,

to a wasted countryside and the harassing raids of his own flying columns. Such was the experience of Agricola, of Severus, of Constantius Chlorus and later of English kings who sought to subdue Scotland. In theory, the continuous Wall seems a decisive answer to guerilla tactics; in practice it enabled the Romans to advance to the Forth-Clyde line within twenty years.

The political effect of the continuous Wall is also evident and important. Envoys may slip unseen at night across a road frontier, however efficiently patrolled, and so may substantial bodies of warriors, or migrating peasants, or raiders and brigands. The road frontier is a barrier only against massed attack, a base for Roman penetration. The continuous Wall wholly cuts off communications; no messenger from either side can cross, to help prepare a concerted raid on the garrisons; still less could warrior bands concentrate for an attack. Commercial and private intercourse can now occur only at the will of the Romans; the peoples south of the new frontier are shut in to themselves, forced more rapidly to accept Roman suzerainty and thorough economic and political dependence on the Roman government. The Wall effectively divides the native population, as the Stanegate did not.

During the construction of the Wall, the original plan underwent a series of significant modifications. It is unlikely that such changes, for the most part expensive ones, were made because some official had a new idea. New ideas are rarely translated into practice without an urgent immediate reason; these changes were due to experience gained since the building of the Wall began. Most of them have been satisfactorily explained by the geological or geographical difficulties encountered by the builders, involving the differences in material and dimensions of the Wall. But two changes cannot be so explained, namely the decision to move the forts up to the line of the Wall and the decision to add the southern

ditch, the Vallum. Yet these decisions must also have been prompted by the experiences gained during the construction of the Wall.

The effect of incorporating the major forts in the line of the Wall is twofold: firstly, the garrison can issue northward somewhat more rapidly in response to a surprise attack; more important, detached forts to the south could easily be isolated from the Wall itself by an attack from the rear, but, incorporated in the Wall, they provide all-round defence against attacks from any quarter.

The effect of adding the Vallum is clearly to prevent the access of unauthorised persons (and not merely goods or cattle) to the Wall and its incorporated structures. The political situation in Hadrian's time suggests two types of unauthorised person: in the event of a concerted attack from north and south, it is evident that the main body of attackers must have come from the north—after half a century of occupation, the Romans were no longer strangers to the area behind the Wall, and their roads and forts (not to mention their intelligence system) were sufficient to prevent any but small concentrations in the rear. But in a concerted attack it would be perfectly feasible for quite a small band to seize and hold some point on the line of the Wall, through which a large force from the north could penetrate—Haltwhistle Burn, for example, gives an excellent covered approach to Caw Gap, where a small band might hold the heights for some while. The impassable, continuous obstacle of the Vallum would effectively prevent such a surprise.

A second effect of the Vallum would be to prevent the infiltration of envoys or spies proceeding from south to north. During the occupation of the Wall, and still more during its building, a considerable number of local natives are likely to have been employed on and about the Wall itself in menial capacities. While their entry could be carefully screened, any unauthorised person who

managed to slip in amongst them might well escape detection. The construction of the Vallum would prevent even a hardy individual crossing except at a controlled entry.

A third effect of the Vallum would be felt if it were necessary to drive small bands of malefactors, or individual criminals, against the line of the Wall from the south. The immediate southern face of the Wall and its forts must normally have been occupied by the impedimenta of daily life — horses, baggage, persons, booths or the like — among which the fugitives might escape detection and the pursuers cause dislocation. The Vallum would provide a convenient base-line for such pursuit, without incommoding the ordinary business of the garrison of the Wall.

Throughout the second century, so long as the Wall remained a barrier separating one set of hostile, un-Romanised barbarians from another, the Vallum was carefully cleaned and kept in commission. In the third and fourth centuries, when the Wall had done its social and political work, and had become a frontier between Roman and barbarian, the Vallum was superseded. The civilian settlements outside the forts were built over its line. It must therefore be regarded as something conditioned by the hostility of the natives on the Roman side of the frontier—if it were no more than a customs barrier or a juridical frontier, it would still have been needed in the fourth century.

To summarise the argument: the military function of the Wall was to subdue the lowlands of Scotland and end the threat of guerilla warfare; its political function was to divide and break up the unfriendly hill peoples. Only when that function was achieved did it become a frontier in the modern sense. At some stage during the building of the Wall, it was found necessary to guard against a concerted attack from north and south; that need was met by incorporating the forts in the line of

the Wall, and by constructing the rearward ditch or Vallum. The concerted attack may have taken place, or perhaps was merely feared. It may be connected with the obstinate body of epigraphic and prosopographical evidence which hints at a second British expedition under Hadrian, *circa* 130 or rather later. Evidence for it may be wholly lacking — especially if the attack never materialised, or was a failure—but it may be under the soil. The suggestions in this article are therefore put forward, with all humility, in the spirit of R. G. Collingwood's dictum: "You will not find what you do not seek."

NOTE: To members of this Society Mr Morris's "third effect of the Vallum", p. 52 above, will provide a striking and agreeable link with an observation by R. S. Ferguson, editor of the old series of these *Transactions* and for many years President of our Society, which he communicated in 1887 to the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne; it was printed in AA2 xiii, 1889, 85-88, under the non-committal title of "Hadrian's great barrier", but does not seem to have been laid before this Society. Ferguson observed that the valleys south of the Wall must in Roman times have still been largely covered with dense scrub, which "must have sheltered in its recesses large numbers of Britons, stone implement men, broken men from tribes the Romans had defeated, fugitives from tribal or Roman justice, and others, men who would have an intimate knowledge of the paths and tracks through the 'scrub', where no heavy armed Roman soldier could follow them. Such men assembling suddenly at unexpected places, perhaps by night, in bands of from, perhaps, a dozen to two hundred, would quickly demoralise the Roman troops defending the Stone Wall . . ."; and he concluded that the Vallum was added as a defence against "the attacks of *guerillas*, *banditti*, and *dacoits* that infested the 'scrub' in their rear." Modern study of the various structures makes much of Ferguson's detailed argument no longer effective, but he deserves credit for noting the essential difference between the military problems to be faced to north and to south of the new frontier, which Mr Morris brings out so clearly in his paper. E.B.