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### REVIEW, 1998

David Shotter, *The Roman Frontier in Britain (Hadrian's Wall, The Antonine Wall and Roman Policy in the North)*. Preston: Carnegie Publishing (1996). ISBN 1 85936 015 7. Pp. xvi + 176, figs 15, pl. 58. £9.95.

J. C. Mann, *Britain and the Roman Empire* (Variorum Collected Studies Series CS545). Aldershot: Variorum, Ashgate Publishing Ltd. (1996). ISBN 0 86078 580 7. Pp. x + 263. £55.

A newcomer to the subject reading David Shotter's *The Roman Frontier in Britain* will find a reliable and far-ranging introduction to, for the most part, the northern frontiers of Roman Britain, especially the walls of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius. Guided by an ancient historian with a deep involvement in the Roman frontier archaeology of his own region (the reader will note the number of archaeological examples drawn from the northwest), the student need have no fear of ungrounded hypothesis or speculation; much of this book is theoretical, but the reader can rest assured that the theories are of the academic mainstream, old familiar friends rather than impetuously flown kites.

So regularly advanced have been some of the interpretations suggested, that the reader might be forgiven for forgetting that they are theories, rather than facts. For example, the suggestion that the army moved out and civilians moved into forts in north Britain in the later third century is not standing the test of time: extensive excavations at South Shields have yielded no sign of later-third century demilitarisation, though it is one of the examples cited here. "Total abandonment" is suggested for Wallsend and Birdoswald in the third century: the cited bibliographical source

does not in fact provide evidence for this, nor do the recent (and recently published) excavations at Birdoswald. An unquestioning adherence to this once innovative idea might give the misleading impression that we have learned little, and questioned less, about the northern frontier since the 1970s.

The emphasis of the approach is on Roman historical personalities and their perceived frontier policies, giving the book a clear and useful structure, but giving the impression that the archaeological evidence is being hung on an historical framework. This was the time-honoured approach to Hadrian's Wall, as seen in the Wall-period system of 1929 onwards. In the 60s and 70s the simplicity of the Wall-periods was challenged, and the resulting more subtle and contingency-laden view of the Wall and its problems is largely the one presented here.

Appendices discussing the quality of literary sources and coins as evidence are useful; a similarly informed and critical approach to the structural archaeological evidence, and how we know what we think we know on the basis of excavation, would be welcome. For example: linked with the two departures of the army to undertake successive Antonine occupations of Scotland, on the Cumberland coast three phases of second-century occupation, separated by "clear periods of abandonment" are emphatically stated (p. 92) to be seen in fortlets, towers, and linear barriers. Here, apparently, the general "Wall-periods" live on. In reality, even at the solitary fortlet of the handful investigated where three phases were clearly observed (Biglands), the association of the phases with historical events was hardly a clear cut matter – there were no demonstrable periods of abandonment between the alterations. A recently excavated fortlet in this

series (Milefortlet 21, Swarthy Hill) showed no such phases. Alterations and replacements to towers and linear installations do not mean the abandonment of a frontier, as demonstrated by continuous replacements of timber and stone watchtowers on the Roman frontier in Germany. In this book the non-specialist reader may be deceived by the firmness with which perceived chronological understanding of sites of all periods is stated into thinking that we can tell more than we actually can from evidence that is at best exiguous.

The book poses a series of questions – why were there frontiers in Britain at all? Why were they placed when and where they were? – and the answer provided is generally that the fortunes of the conquest and the frontiers in Britain were determined by the emperor's personal preoccupations and by distractions on other frontiers. A pioneeringly influential and extreme statement of this kind of view, seeing a province such as Britain as a passive backcloth against which the military manifestations of personal glory-seeking and prevarication were played out, was published by the ancient historian J. C. Mann in 1974, in *The Frontiers of the Principate*, one of a series of papers by this well-known member of our Society collected and reissued as one of the *Variorum* series.

Roman frontiers, in this view, are symbols of abdication and failure. Elsewhere in this volume, in his influential and generally charitable review (1979) of Edward Luttwak's *Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, Mann objects to Luttwak's concept of carefully planned, "scientific" frontiers, not so much because the frontiers did not work the way Luttwak suggests they did, but because in Mann's view they were arrived at by accident and represented a power giving up when the going got tough. Behind all this lies an implicit assumption that had they possessed the determination and rational co-ordination to see it through, the Romans could have carried on conquest indefinitely, in Britain and elsewhere.

This has become something of an orthodoxy, but does it have to be accepted without question? An alternative view would be to see

frontiers like Hadrian's Wall as representing the best that the Romans could do in difficult circumstances of opposition, infiltration and simultaneous outbreaks of trouble on several frontiers: factors well attested in the sources, but often downplayed. In his oft-cited and highly influential review of Luttwak, Mann lists many attestations of Roman emperors' belief in their own glory and divine destiny to expand the empire. Should not such propaganda be offset with texts such as that on the recently discovered (1992) Victory altar from Augsburg? This shows that the Roman frontier in southern Germany was penetrated by barbarians so effectively in 259–260 that they managed to carry off many thousands of captives from Italy, before being intercepted by a hastily assembled Roman force on the way back. Against this background, was it really inefficiency and lack of will which lay behind the establishment of frontiers, or a practical exercise in containment?

The volume seems expensive for something akin to a collection of photocopies (the papers are not re-set in a uniform style but are facsimile re-prints of the original publications), but actually provides an invaluable compendium for any serious student of the Roman army, the cities and administration of the Roman provinces, or the Roman frontiers in Britain. In the manner of pop-singers' greatest hits records, care has been taken to include a couple of "previously unreleased" items to tempt fans to add this to their collection. One of these is a superbly clear and thought-provoking view of the function of cities in the Roman world. This contains the assertion, which I extract because it represents a prevalent "new view" about Roman cities (compare, for example, B. Isaac's *Limits of Empire*), that as long as cities functioned in terms of tax-collection and administration, the Roman state cared little about their physical appearance, and was still less likely to provide actual financial support. This dovetails with the recent argument by Martin Millett, also, that the *civitates* of Britain were not Roman state creations, but the initiative of indigenous elites. One does not have to turn back to that

famous passage in the *Agricola* about the good governor fostering urban life – Mann himself elsewhere in this volume effectively demolishes the historical value of other set-piece literary exercises, or *topoi* in the *Agricola* – to have doubts about this trend of thought. Building in cities can be linked with Imperial visits, sometimes involving the munificence of the emperor himself, while in Britain many have found it hard to believe that rudimentary but model *civitas*-capitals which sprang out of nowhere, and sometimes out of former legionary bases (e.g. Exeter, Wroxeter) do not betray the hand of the army and the state: in the telling phrase of Professor Fulford, “set piece developments, one might argue, with no evidence for the involvement of native elites...”.

The range of topics explored in this volume is too wide to be encompassed in a single review. Notable for long-standing influence, as with the *Frontiers*, and review of Luttwak discussed above, is an essay with Brian Dobson, *Roman army in Britain and Britons in the Roman army* (1973), which established the text-book view that in Britain local recruitment predominated from the Flavian period for the *auxilia*, from the mid-second century for the legions. Set alongside this are well-known and important papers on legionary recruitment (the subject for which Professor Mann is best known) and military discharge certificates.

The papers on the northern frontiers, of both general and highly specialist interest, are full of thought-provoking and fascinating material, covering many aspects. One way in which Mann is controversial is his insistence on sticking to a long and late secondary occupation of the Antonine Wall, between 180 and c. 195. No other student of Antonine Scotland now maintains this sort of chronology; most discarded it as long ago as 1972 when Brian Hartley suggested that military sites north of Newstead did not produce samian ware later than the 160s in date. Mann argues ingeniously against the generally accepted ceramic argument, but his chronology really stumbles on an unquestioning assumption of two structural

periods on Antonine sites in Scotland. It is more likely, as recent research has shown, that what was a striking but exceptional phenomenon at Newstead and Birrens was indiscriminately and optimistically claimed at all Scottish sites by excavators early in this century. An objective view of the structural evidence shows no general evidence for a second Antonine period in Scotland. Rebuilding was taking place on Hadrian's Wall from 158; this surely marks the end, or the beginning of the end, of the Antonine Wall.

Seeing Antonine Scotland as of brief single period has implications for some long-cherished ideas about the history of Roman frontiers. Elsewhere in this volume (in *Frontiers of the Principate*) Mann says: “The oscillations between the Hadrianic and Antonine Walls in the second century hold no more than antiquarian interest”. In this view the Roman army comes and goes in north Britain as it pleases. Its advances and withdrawals are dictated by fluctuating imperial ambition and apathy, and distractions elsewhere. This brings us back to our starting point, for this is the same model which underlies the narrative of Shotter's book, where the twentieth century historical construct of Antonine I and Antonine II is similarly unquestioned. The possible alternative of a short single Antonine occupation of Scotland, easily frustrated, emphasises the difficulties that the Roman army may really have faced on the ground, and that local events – and opposition – may have played a more decisive role in the history of frontiers than has been supposed in recent times.

It may seem churlish to close on the critical note that in both these books the beginner needs to be wary of interpretations of the northern frontier in Britain that are either old-fashioned or not universally accepted. But both contain much of the highest value. In a field crowded with numerous popular and semi-popular publications of varying and sometimes dubious quality, Shotter's portrait of the frontiers in Britain successfully and reliably distils the complexities of the subject into an accessible – and inexpensive – form. In the Mann collection, the reader is privileged to

have at his fingertips a series of dissections of evidence, and clear-minded deductions which have truly advanced our understanding of the Roman world, certainly fulfilling the modestly expressed aim given in the introduction: "to concentrate on a very cautious and exhaustive

consideration of the ancient material, disregarding the irrelevant", and so "to forward the study of the past".

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