

III

The Wall of Severus?

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INTRODUCTION

In 1984 Mark Hassall drew attention in a note in *Britannia*¹ to the statement by the fourth century author Eutropius that Septimius Severus built 32 miles of Wall and noted that this represented exactly the distance from the Irthing to the Solway: the length of the rebuilt Turf Wall. Hassall suggested that in the light of this, the evidence, both archaeological and literary, for the accepted dating of the rebuilding be reconsidered. Certainly it is rash to ignore sources which if not contemporary are much nearer to the events than we are. To that end it may be useful to look again at the basis for dating certain aspects of the building of the Roman Wall and its relation to the archaeological evidence.

Clearly the dispute over the original author of the Tyne-Solway stone wall goes back at least to the 8th century. In his Ecclesiastical History,² the Venerable Bede wrote that some think – *ut quidam aestimant* – that Severus built a wall – *murus* – whereas he, Bede, was confident in disagreeing with them and describing in detail a rampart – *uallum* – built by that Emperor.

ANCIENT SOURCES³

The earliest surviving written sources dating the Wall's building originate from the fourth century. The dates given vary between the second century as recorded in the Augustan History of Hadrian's reign; the third century by Aurelius Victor and the turn of the fourth and fifth by Gildas and Bede; all with equal confidence. It is only in the last sixty years that there

has been a fair degree of agreement on the subject.

Had we only the Augustan History⁴ to rely upon there would be no problem. Here it is unambiguously stated that Hadrian built an 80 mile *murus* to separate the Romans from the barbarians (here and subsequently the word 'mile' refers to the Roman *milia passuum* of 1,620 Imperial yards). Lest it be assumed too readily that *murus* means a stone wall, it is well to bear in mind that in the following book of the Augustan History the same word *murus*, qualified by the adjective *caespiticius*, is used to describe the turf-built Antonine Wall.⁵ The Augustan Histories date from the fourth century and their authors are suspected of being fictitious.⁶ Certainly the material is internally inconsistent: both Hadrian and Severus are credited with building a *murus* from sea to sea.⁷

Taken on their own, the other ancient written sources overwhelmingly support an attribution of the Wall to Severus. Perhaps significantly neither Herodian nor Cassius Dio specifically mentioned the Wall at all. It was not until a century and a half later that Sextus Aurelius Victor, writing during the reign of Julian the Apostate, simply stated that Severus built a *murus* across the island.⁸ On the other hand, his contemporary Eutropius⁹ wrote that it was a *uallum* that Severus built – not a *murus* – from sea to sea and added the further detail, already quoted, that it was 32 miles long.¹⁰

Another late fourth century writer, Jerome also used the word *uallum* to describe Severus' work but stated that its length was not 32 miles but 132.¹¹ He further added a date for its construction: 207 A.D. Orosius, writing in Spain a quarter of a century later, stated that Severus constructed not only a *uallum* but also a *fossa* –

either the wall-ditch or the feature now misleadingly called the Vallum.¹² Orosius, who evidently drew upon Eutropius, added the detail of frequent towers and apparently also gave the length as 132 miles.

GILDAS, BEDE & THE WALLS

Orosius was in turn a major source for the earliest English historian to interpret the Wall building sequence, the Venerable Bede. Writing in 731 he specifically cited Eutropius¹³ and Gildas¹⁴ as his sources; from internal evidence it is clear that he also used Jerome. Additionally, and significantly, he claimed to have passed on whatever he could ascertain from common report.¹⁵ From Orosius he took the fact of the construction by Severus of a *uallum*: *Itaque Severus magnam fossam firmissimumque uallum, crebris insuper turribus communitum*.¹⁶ However he elaborated on Orosius' account, stating that Severus' *uallum* was made not only of sods cut from the ground – *de cespitibus quibus circumcisis e terra* – but was surmounted with a pallisade – *sudes de lignis fortissimus*. The whole thing extended *a mari ad mare*.

Apart from Orosius, Bede's other main source was the British monk Gildas, who had written in the mid sixth century. Unlike Bede, who followed Orosius in dating the first Tyne-Solway *uallum* to the early third century, Gildas knew of no earlier fortification at all and wrote of a wall first built after the usurpation of Magnus Maximus at the end of the fourth century. This he attributed to the Britons themselves, who built it in turf, *non tam lapidibus quam cespitibus*. Bede, expanding Gildas' text, explained this choice of material by their lack of engineering skills – *nullum tanti operis artificem*. In Gildas' view this turf wall was useless, so a stone wall was built by a temporarily returning Roman *legio* with the help of the Britons, presumably on the same line. This done, the soldiers, obliged to leave again, instructed the Britons to take charge of their own defence. Significantly Bede used the word allies for the Britons – *sociis, quos derelinquere cogebantur*.¹⁷

Unlike Gildas, Bede knew that, apart from the *uallum* which he attributed to Severus, there were also two separate and distinct walls to be explained, a hundred miles apart. Therefore he identified the first wall with the Antonine Wall and the second with Hadrian's Wall.

EARLY MODERN SOURCES

Bede's account of the sequence of events relating to the Wall was accepted long after his death; the next significant writer, Camden, repeated it in full in the sixteenth century.¹⁸ Indeed it was almost exactly a millenium after the completion of the Ecclesiastical History, before Horsley produced a coherent new interpretation of Wall history in the first comprehensive account of the history and archaeology of Roman Britain.¹⁹ In the light of the written and epigraphic evidence available in his day, Horsley quite reasonably assigned the earthwork which we now call the Vallum to Hadrian, and the Stone wall to Severus; a view widely supported until this century. Horsley had problems with the respective measurements 32 and 132 miles in the ancient sources, since obviously neither of them accurately represented the whole visible length of the wall from Wallsend to Bowness. His explanation of the apparent error was that the figure in the surviving texts of Jerome and Orosius was corrupt and had probably originally read not CXXXII but LXXXII, only two miles out from the correct figure. The letter L, Horsley suggested, had been omitted from the text of Eutropius making the figure read XXXII. Of course the other possibility, not considered by Horsley, is that either 32 is correct, as suggested by Hassall, or even that 132 (or indeed both) could be correct within their own terms of reference.

THE TERM VALLUM

When Eutropius and Jerome described the events of the early third century in Britain, they were writing in a very different world, within a few years of the invasion of Britain in 367,

involving not only Picts from across the Wall, but also invaders from Ireland and the Continent. When Eutropius wrote that Severus fortified the recovered provinces *omni securitate*, was he thinking of the problems of his own day and envisaging the *uallum* to which he referred as a more comprehensive defence system than merely the Wall itself? There are other examples, both epigraphic and literary, of the word used in this sense. In the second century a commander of *Legio VI* referred to actions *trans uallum* at a time when a *murus* certainly existed.²⁰ Clearly he meant *uallum* here to mean 'frontier'. Two of the Antonine Wall building inscriptions which survive contain the phrase *opus ualli*,²¹ apparently meaning frontier-works all together; turf wall, ditch and road. Similarly, in the Antonine Itinerary, the first two *itineraria* start *a vallo* – and in the first one this is specifically equated with *limes*. *Iter I* starts at High Rochester and *Iter II* at Birrens, both well to the north of Hadrian's Wall.

Likewise in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, apparently compiled about half a century after Eutropius, the section headed *per lineam ualli* appears to include not just the Roman Wall as such, but continues an unbroken list of forts and regiments round the west coast and beyond. It is possible that this list is the result of a quirk of punctuation and there should be a break at the Solway, but this seems unlikely as the units listed *per lineam valli* are (with the exception of Burgh-by-Sands and Ribchester) all of the old *cohors/ala* type, unlike those included in the earlier part of the command of the *Dux Britanniarum*. In other words, it seems that the frontier did comprise the whole line under threat, not only from Picts coming by land, but also to the west where, in the words of Claudian, the sea foamed with the hostile oars of the Scotti.²² John Mann has suggested that this threat was met by a unified command based upon Maryport, renamed *Praesidio* to reflect its enhanced status.²³ It may be a coincidence, but the line from Wallsend through Maryport to the southernmost coastal fort at Ravenglass is almost exactly 132 miles long, so it is possible that this really was the figure intended by Orosius.

On the other hand it could be either merely a copying error or a rationalisation by a later editor who did not know the real length of the Wall, but did know that 32 miles was too short. Hassall proposed that this latter figure, given by Eutropius, is correct and represents not the length of the whole Wall, but exactly the distance from the Irthing to Bowness; the original full length of the Turf Wall. In other words: that Severus replaced the 32 miles of Turf Wall some half a century later than usually proposed. This would represent actual wall-building rather than the mere refurbishment with which Severus is conventionally credited. If so, it could be argued that there are other consequences, which might even reconcile the 32 mile length with a sea-to-sea description.

TURF WALL AND STONE WALL

Until F. G. Simpson's excavations in 1911 in Wall Miles 49 and 50 the relationship of the Turf and Stone Wall, even in the sector where they are visibly separate, was not understood.²⁴ At that time, the idea of a wall built of turf extending as far as the Irish Sea was still treated with scepticism, not to say derision; indeed its existence was not finally established until 1933.²⁵ As well as establishing the relation of the two Walls between MC49 and MC51, Simpson produced dating evidence for their replacement in the Hadrianic period. Given that there were good practical reasons for moving the Wall to create extra space at Birdoswald, it is reasonable to consider this as a special case and to see no good reason for replacing the rest of the Turf Wall curtain immediately, or even soon. Physical conditions had not changed; the Turf Wall had just taken a great deal of labour and it seems perverse at once to waste all that effort. On the other hand, it could be said that the building of the Antonine Wall in the 140s represented an even more spectacular waste of the effort so recently expended on the whole Tyne-Solway frontier.

TOWERS OF THE TURF WALL

Whatever the date of the rebuilding of the wall curtain, the other structures in this western sector were built in stone at different times. The towers were built in stone from the start, and their relation to the Turf Wall was established in the 1930s by Simpson, Richmond and McIntyre in a series of excavations at a selection of tower sites.²⁶ They also identified the common features of these towers: that they were primary structures contemporary with the Turf Wall which butted up against their sides. As later incorporated into the Stone Wall they project in front of it by some 2' 6", unlike the towers east of the Irthing. It has been suggested that this would have set the side door of the tower back to coincide with the walk on the Turf Wall,²⁷ and that, to meet these already-existing doors, the Stone Wall must have been set back likewise. An alternative explanation, which does not presuppose a continuation of the use of the wall walk after the stone rebuild, is that it was merely to avoid collapses such as had already occurred at T54a. Here the primary stone-built tower had collapsed into the ditch and been replaced behind on firmer ground, before ever the Stone Wall arrived. As even Simpson & Richmond admitted this suggested a relatively long life for the Turf Wall. A recent study of the pottery suggests a mid-C2 date for the replacement tower.²⁸ In the light of this, surely builders placing a heavy Stone Wall on a wide but shallow foundation (whether cobbled or not) and originally intended only to carry a turf superstructure, would not put it right at the edge. A couple of feet back from the edge would seem an eminently sensible place to put the replacement wall.

THE FORTS OF THE TURF WALL

Given that the towers were in stone from the start, the earliest actual replacement of buildings in this sector appears to have involved the forts. Tony Wilmott's recent excavations have shown that Birdoswald was first built in turf-and-timber, then replaced by a stone fort built

into the existing Turf Wall. After a break in construction, this was completed at the time of the early replacement of the Turf Wall in Wall Miles 49 and 50; all Hadrianic in date. Initially the stone structure seems to have been fitted quite comfortably into the turf curtain. The other five forts in Cumberland have not been excavated as thoroughly as Birdoswald – three are extensively built over – but at four of the five there seems to be evidence of turf-and-timber forts replaced quite early in stone.²⁹

THE MILECASTLES OF THE TURF WALL

The only remaining change in the buildings, necessitated by the replacement of the Turf Wall, would be the reconstruction in stone of the turf-and-timber milecastles. Here again there have been few sites excavated. Simpson's campaign included the excavation in 1933–1934 of MC54 at Randylands; an analysis of the finds from this excavation was published half a century later³⁰ and appears to indicate a date in the mid-second century. In 1949 Ian Richmond and John Gillam excavated MC79 and proposed that it was rebuilt in stone at the time of the re-occupation of Hadrian's Wall under Calpurnius Agricola in the 160s.³¹ Nothing produced from subsequent work at MC65³² and MC72³³ suggests a later date for their replacement.

THE REPLACEMENT OF THE TURF WALL CURTAIN

Simpson and Richmond argued that the milecastles would have to be rebuilt in stone since they found it difficult to imagine turf-and-timber milecastles continuing in a stone curtain. Turn that argument on its head; is it unlikely that stone milecastles could have been inserted into a continuing Turf Wall? After all, this had already happened at Birdoswald and probably the other forts also. So even if, as seems likely, all the buildings were replaced in stone during the second century this still does not invalidate

the suggestion that the curtain itself, from Wall Mile 54 to the Solway, might date from the early third century.

THE INTERMEDIATE WALL

A possible reason for such a delay is that rebuilding of 30 miles of curtain would simply have required a much greater volume of scarce resources than merely replacing the forts and milecastles. This second phase in its replacement, whenever it was built, appears to run west from the Red Rock fault, and is usually called the Intermediate Wall since it is commonly asserted that this section of Wall is consistently 9' wide and clearly distinguishable from the 8' Narrow Wall and the 10' Broad Wall in the other sectors. That this uniformity is more apparent than real was pointed out a quarter of a century ago by Eric Birley.³⁴ Indeed as early an observer as Horsley noted variations in the Broad Wall, recording Wall only 7' 4" wide at Harlow Hill.³⁵ Similarly the reports on the limited number of excavations of the so-called Intermediate Wall show considerable variation in width there, from 8' at T72b – no wider than the Narrow Wall – to 10' 6" at Tarraby, as wide as the Broad Wall. Is it really possible positively to identify a clearly recognisable Intermediate Wall quite distinct both in dimensions and date? Simpson and Richmond recognised the difficulty of generalising about the western part of the Wall and reported that, while there was uniformity from MC49 to T52a, the measurements after that were increasingly haphazard.

GEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Horsley was the first to mention instability of ground in the west, when he wrote of the Wall at Bleatarn in Wall Mile 60 as being built on piles.³⁶ Could this lack of firm foundations not be sufficient reason for the Wall in the west to vary greatly in width, and on the whole tend to be wider than in the east, where solid rock

nearer the surface is covered with a thin and stable layer of soil?³⁷

As long ago as 1934 it was recognised that the most important problem caused by the crossing of the Red Rock Fault was the shortage of limestone to burn for mortar.³⁸ That in itself was surely an adequate reason for delay in replacing the curtain. Additionally the available building material also changes both in quantity and quality, from hard coarse-grained yellow or grey sandstone in the east to fine-grained soft red sandstone. In particular, to the west of Carlisle, suitable building stone of any kind is in very short supply, a fact illustrated by the continued use of clay for building houses on the Solway Plain until the C19.

As far as quality was concerned, the red sandstone at T56b was apparently of the consistency of cheese, soft enough to cut with a spade.³⁹ The more recent experience of the opening up, by the then Ministry of Public Buildings & Works, of the red sandstone Wall by the King Water in Wall Mile 55 illustrates the unsatisfactory nature of much of the local stone. Before it was reburied, it was rapidly taking on the texture and appearance, not so much of cheese, as of demerara sugar. Building techniques had to adapt to what was available. The excavators wrote of the Roman Army's "sagacious reaction" to the changing conditions of the countryside in which they were at work.⁴⁰

THE WORK OF SEVERUS' ARMY

At T57a it was noted that the tower was built of much superior stone to the adjoining curtain which was also much rougher in construction.⁴¹ We have work by legionaries in the Geltsdale quarries dated by their doodles to the reign of Severus, and specifically to the consular year of Aper and Maximus: 207 A.D.⁴² Is it possible that the soldiers in question concentrated on the more sophisticated structures, while the tribal groups identified in the western sector did simpler work on the curtain? Bede recorded two facts about the construction of the Wall which have been proved archaeologically.⁴³

While it is unlikely that he saw those crude building inscriptions by Catuvellauni near Lanercost, nor Brigantes apparently working in the quarries at Bleatarn,⁴⁴ he did know that the Britons lent assistance to the soldiers in building the Stone Wall. Likewise, he referred to building being undertaken *sumptu publico privatoque*. One of the 'private persons' involved may have been Vindomorucus who marked his stint of Wall with a slab at Drumburgh.⁴⁵ Did Bede learn this from 'common report', even if his dating was a few centuries out?

As well as the graffiti mentioned above, work on the Wall is dated to 207 by Jerome and Cassiodorus, so it appears that it must have been interrupted by the renewal of the Caledonian war which necessitated the advent of the elderly, ailing Emperor and his sons in 208. Presumably the *optio* Agricola's squad, who inscribed their names on the Written Rock of Gelt,⁴⁶ laid down their chisels in the following year, rejoined *II Augusta* and accompanied Severus when he set off in person on his war of extermination against the faithless northern tribes. If this had succeeded it would presumably have resulted in the permanent reoccupation of Caledonia; certainly the standard of construction of the fortress at Carpow suggests that.

In that case there would have been no point in completing the refurbishment of the southern Wall. Possibly a decision on the completion of the Wall and its structures was delayed until things settled down under Caracalla and his successors, and a new frontier policy was in place.

THE HEIGHT OF THE CURTAIN

Whenever the Turf Wall was replaced in stone, whether by the Severi or not, it was presumably rebuilt to a height to fit the existing structures. From calculations based on their observations at Bar Hill on the Antonine Wall and MC50(TW), Simpson and Richmond⁴⁷ proposed a height of 12' for the Turf Wall, believing

that its base would not have supported a superstructure higher than that. One need only look at the history of the replica at Vindolanda to appreciate the problems of settlement and stability of turf structures, though it must be stressed that the comparison may be misleading as the modern structures were built by amateurs, not by Roman soldiers with virtually daily experience of turf construction.

Assume, then, that to fit the structures of a 12' Turf Wall, the replacement to the west of the Irthing must have been a stone wall about 12' high – whether Antonine, Marcan or Severan in date. What was done in the Severan period to the east of that river is clearer since Jim Crow's excavations on the National Trust estate between 1982 and 1988, which identified more clearly than before the rebuilt early third century Wall.⁴⁸ His identification of this rebuilding with the Wall attributed to Severus by the ancient writers seems quite reasonable, though there are no inscriptions positively to date the curtain. On the other hand, there are many in the forts and it makes sense to regard the rebuilding of the Wall as merely part of the general repair of the northern frontier, started immediately after Severus' recovery of Britain, begun by Virius Lupus, followed in turn by Valerius Pudens and Alfenus Senecio and which, but for the break for the campaign into Scotland, continued until the 240s. Buildings in question were actually described in inscriptions as being decrepit *uetustate conlapsum*. Even bath-houses, which must have been built in stone from the first, needed rebuilding at Lanchester and Chester-le-Street.⁴⁹ Presumably many of the other buildings were still wooden or half-timbered and were literally falling down, having by now stood for the best part of a century.

Jim Crow's excavations showed that much of the Hadrianic Wall curtain was not only in a very poor condition, but shoddy in construction in the first place, the core consisting of only stones and soil. Despite this, in places the existing wall had obviously been retained and patched up. Elsewhere, where it was beyond economical repair, it had been completely replaced. These replacements were identified

with the extra-narrow stretches of Wall between 5' 9" and 6' 6" wide, clearly distinguishable not only from the Hadrianic Broad Foundation but also from the Hadrianic Narrow Wall. This is particularly clear near the tower at the bottom of Peel Gap. Unlike the Hadrianic structure, this new wall had its rubble core grouted in mortar right through. It has been suggested that this narrowing of the Wall would automatically result in its reduction in height to maintain a roughly 3:2 ratio between height and width. On the other hand, when the construction methods are considered, this argument cannot be pushed too far. The new Wall must have been inherently much more stable than the old; we are hardly comparing like with like.

To the Severan rebuilding may also be attributed the surface rendering recently identified in places as far apart as the Craggs and West Denton.⁵⁰ From this date also apparently originates the whitewashing in the former sector; if it is really whitewashing. The new granaries at Birdoswald, epigraphically dated to 205–208, are similarly finished though there the excavators have suggested that this whitening was a by-product of the pointing technique employed rather than deliberate decoration.⁵¹

THE TOWERS AND THE WALL-WALK

The Severan alterations also appear to have involved the demolition of some, but not all, of the towers, particularly those in the Craggs sector. From Coesike to Cawfields all those examined had been pulled down and the recesses filled up.⁵² Eighty years ago Simpson established that at T39a and T39b the new Wall was built right over the remains of these towers. The Severan date for these demolitions is supported by the absence of third century pottery from the sites in question. It is asserted that the building up of the recesses in the Wall left by this demolition proves the continued use of a wall walk. Might it not alternatively be necessary to reinforce a section of Wall left only 3' thick, robbed of the buttressing previously provided by the side walls of the tower? In any case

these alterations suggest that, in the third century, there was a different strategy for the mural barrier, which did not need all the towers and so presumably also dispensed with signalling.

It is commonly accepted that the Hadrianic system depended on such signalling in connection with foot patrols along a paved walkway on the top of the Wall. If the Wall was originally 15' high this path was perilously narrow in the 8' sector but still practicable.⁵³ The narrowest of the new Wall was less than this – as little as 5' 9" wide, and consistently no more than 6'. Take off the width of a parapet and surely this would preclude its use as a practical walkway, let alone a fighting-platform, particularly at night and in bad weather.⁵⁴ Without such a walkway and without a regular provision of towers, the previous use was out of the question. Part of a system is no system at all.

The post-Severan frontier strategy appears to have consisted of a buffer-zone with a heavily manned early warning system well in advance of Hadrian's Wall. Millitary equitate cohorts were certainly stationed at Netherby, Risingham, High Rochester and probably at Bewcastle. As well as the regular units, we know of *exploratores* at the first three – epigraphically at Risingham and High Rochester, and at Netherby from its new name *Castra Exploratorium*. The altar inscriptions from Jedburgh Abbey,⁵⁵ possibly originating from Cappuck, indicate that not only did these troops, both *Raeti Gaesati* from Risingham and *Cohors I Uardullorum* from High Rochester, operate well beyond their home-forts, but presumably had permanent bases to the north of the Cheviots. It is well to reflect that the army deployed to the north of the Wall in the third century was equal to nearly half of the total garrison of the Wall under Hadrian. With this active 'defence in depth' it would clearly be unnecessary to maintain a fully-manned and patrolled defensive line from Tyne to Solway as well.

If, then, patrolling was abandoned, continuous access to the top of the wall in the newly built sections was neither necessary nor even possible. With no walkway, no access was needed from the (putative) side doors of mile-castles or of towers where they survived. If they

ever existed such doors could be blocked, so the height of the adjoining wall is immaterial. Might the Severan wall have been, not only 12' high where it replaced the Turf Wall to the west of the Irthing as already suggested, but a standard 12' high along its whole length, with 15' high milecastles and forts sticking up 3' higher? The value of the 15' Hadrianic Wall as a significant military obstacle is a still unresolved debate. It is well also to remember that there is no direct evidence at all for the Hadrianic curtain having been 15' high. The calculations which produce that figure are based on the north gate at MC37 and the flight of stairs at MC48. Nevertheless, if we accept the traditional view of the structure and use of the Hadrianic Wall, then it is reasonable to accept that the C2 Wall must have been 15' high. On the other hand, if we accept the concept of an unpatrolled Severan Wall only 12' high along its full length, then its interpretation as a realistic defensive barrier becomes less credible. Whatever the case before; surely it was thereafter no more than a hindrance to easy movement and, in effect, an elongated barracks.

BEDE AS AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVER

Evidence of the reduced height comes from Bede who categorically stated that the Wall was in fact 8' wide and 12' high. Bede was primarily a historian but it would be worth considering how good an archaeological observer he was. This is illustrated by his account of the Antonine Wall. Where Gildas, probably writing in Wales, gave no geographical details and described the earlier of his two walls merely as *non tam lapidibus quam cespitibus*, Bede added that it was *ualum latissimum et altissimum*, stretching for miles between the firths – *freta vel sinus* – of Forth and Clyde. He further added that very distinct remains of it could still be seen in his day.⁵⁶ This suggests that he may have visited them himself, an impression reinforced by the corroborative detail that it stretched from a point two miles from Abercorn – actually three and a half miles – to near

Dumbarton. The end of the Antonine Wall at Old Kilpatrick is only three miles from Dumbarton. All accurate.

We have further evidence of the accuracy of his observation elsewhere in his description of the precautions taken against barbarian invasion. Gildas stated that *turres per intervalla ad prospectum maris collocant . . . in litore . . . oceani ad meridinam plagam*.⁵⁷ Was there a significance in Bede altering this to *ad meridiem* – towards the south – rather than on the southern shore? If he meant, to the southwards of here [= Jarrow] surely he referred to the towers, not rediscovered until the twentieth century, set at intervals, just as he said, on the Yorkshire coast. Probably it was also one of these towers to which Bede referred when he described Whitby as *sinus fari*, Lighthouse Bay.⁵⁸

Of course, however good his reporting, we cannot be sure that he ever visited the Antonine Wall or the coastal towers, but he could almost see the Wallsend-Newcastle sector of Hadrian's Wall from his window at Jarrow. Unlike the rest of the eastern half of the Wall, these four miles are, just as he said, exactly 8' wide. If he got the width right, why not the height? Do we not ignore the evidence of such an accurate observer at our peril?

It has been argued that, in Bede's day, the Wall had been already long out of use and may have partly fallen down. In general walls do not fall down a foot at a time. Unless the top stones have been removed for reuse, they usually stand more or less intact. Where they do not survive, they either fall over flat, as was the case at the Newcastle Western By-pass excavation,⁵⁹ or collapse in a heap only a few feet high as the structure disintegrates, as in much of the central sector of the Wall.

In their article on the structure of the Wall, Peter Hill and Brian Dobson make the point that one of the problems created by the idea that Hadrian's Wall had a walkway is the tendency of such a flat paved stone path to collect puddles of rainwater which percolate into the structure.⁶⁰ May not that be precisely what had happened to Hadrian's Wall with rain and frost weakening its jerry-built structure for eighty years and that, at the beginning of the third

century, like the forts, it really was *uetustate conlapsum*? Not needing the walkway, and furthermore seeing the obvious disadvantages of having one, might have persuaded Severus' engineers to replace it with a chamfered top to shed the rainwater. Possibly the thin level courses visible on top of the existing structure at High Shields Crags, now standing 10' 6" high, really represent the top of the Severan wall, shorn only of the coping stones.⁶¹

Cut down to 12' along its length, refurbished or where necessary reconstructed, perhaps plastered and whitewashed, possibly commemorated in the Jarrow inscription:⁶² behold – to all intents and purposes – Severus' own Wall *a mari usque ad mare*.

NOTES

¹ Hassall, M., "The Date of the Rebuilding of Hadrian's Turf Wall in Stone", *Britannia*, 14 (1984), 242–4.

² Bede; *Historia Ecclesiastica*; 1. 5. 13.

³ Mann, J. C., *The Northern Frontier in Britain from Hadrian to Honorius, Literary & Epigraphic Sources*, (Newcastle 1971). The most convenient and accessible source for ancient authors, cited below as e.g., Mann 153.

⁴ *Scriptores Historiae Augustorum, Hadrian xi, 2*: Mann 5.

⁵ *Scriptores Historiae Augustorum, Antonius Pius v, 4*: Mann 39.

⁶ Birley, A. R., *Septimius Severus*, (1988), 205f.

⁷ *Scriptores Historiae Augustorum, Severus xviii, 2*: Mann 142.

⁸ S. Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus*, Mann 141.

⁹ Eutropius, *Breviarium ab Urbe Condita*, Mann 143.

¹⁰ Distinguish between the latin word *uallum*, meaning rampart, given always in italics and the regrettably misnamed ditch to the south of the Wall, now referred to as the Vallum.

¹¹ Jerome, *Chronica*: Mann 146.

¹² Orosius, *Historiae*: Mann 145.

¹³ Bede, *op cit*, 1. 8. 23.

¹⁴ Gildas, trans Winterbottom, M., *The Ruin of Britain (De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae)*, (Chichester 1978).

¹⁵ Bede, *op cit*, Preface.

¹⁶ Bede, *op cit*, 1. 5. 13.

¹⁷ Bede, *op cit*, 1. 12. 30.

¹⁸ Birley, E., *Research on Hadrian's Wall*, (Kendal 1971), 48–69. This chapter gives a summary of the views of the various antiquaries.

¹⁹ Horsley, J., *Britannia Romana*, (1732).

²⁰ RIB 2034.

²¹ RIB 2200 and 2205.

²² Claudian, *De Primo Consulato Stilichonis*; Mann 202.

²³ Mann, J. C., "Birdoswald to Ravenglass", *Britannia*, 20 (1989), 75–9.

²⁴ Simpson, F. G., "Excavations on the Line of the Roman Wall 1909–12", *CW²*, 13 (1913), 297.

²⁵ Simpson, F. G., Richmond, I. A. and McIntyre, J., "Milecastles on the Line of the Turf Wall", *CW²*, 34 (1934), 134.

²⁶ Simpson, F. G., McIntyre, J., "Banks Burn to Randylands", *CW²*, 33 (1933), 262–70. Simpson, F. G., Richmond, I. A. and McIntyre, J., "Garthside Turrets", *CW²*, 34 (1934), 138–44. Simpson, F. G., Richmond, I. A. and Hodgson, K., "New Turret Sites", *CW²*, 34 (1934), 130–7. Simpson, F. G. and Richmond, I. A., "The Use of Clay at Randylands and Garthside", *CW²*, 35 (1935), 244–7.

²⁷ Bellhouse, R., "Roman Sites on the Cumberland Coast", *CW²*, 69 (1969), 79–93.

²⁸ Welsby, D. A., "The Pottery from the Two Turrets at Garthside", *CW²*, 85 (1985), 71–6.

²⁹ Wilmott, T., *Birdoswald* (1997), 89 (for Birdoswald building sequence), 53 (for a summary of other fort sites).

³⁰ Allason-Jones, L., Bennett, J. and Welsby, D. A., "The Finds from Milecastle 54", *AA⁵*, 12 (1984), 227–35.

³¹ Richmond, I. A. and Gillam, J. P., "Milecastle 79 (Solway)", *CW²*, 52 (1952), 17–40.

³² "Roman Britain in 1989", *Britannia*, 21 (1990), 318.

³³ Smith, G. H., "Excavation near Hadrian's Wall at Tarraby Lane", *Britannia*, 9 (1978), 19–55.

³⁴ Birley, E., *op cit*, 84–5.

³⁵ Horsley, J., *op cit*, 122 and 140.

³⁶ Horsley, J., *op cit*, 154.

³⁷ Simpson, F. G., Richmond, I. A. and McIntyre, J., "Garthside Turrets", *CW²*, 34 (1934), 138–44. The plan of T54a is reproduced in Daniels, C. M., *Handbook to the Roman Wall* (13th ed., 1978), 216.

³⁸ Simpson, F. G., Richmond, I. A. and McIntyre, J., "Milecastles on the Line of the Turf Wall", *CW²*, 34 (1934), 135.

³⁹ Simpson, F. G., Richmond, I. A. and Hodgson, K., "New Turret Sites", *CW²*, 34 (1934), 135.

⁴⁰ Simpson, F. G. and Richmond, I. A., "The Use of Clay Instead of Turf at Randylands and Garthside", *CW²*, 35 (1935), 247.

⁴¹ Simpson, F. G., Richmond, I. A. and Hodgson, K., "New Turret Sites", *CW*², 34 (1934), 132.

⁴² RIB 1009.

⁴³ Bede, *op cit*, 1. 12. 30.

⁴⁴ RIB 1962 and 2032.

⁴⁵ RIB 2053.

⁴⁶ RIB 1008.

⁴⁷ Simpson, F. G. and Richmond, I. A., "The Turf Wall of Hadrian", *JRS*, 25 (1935).

⁴⁸ Crow, J. G., "A Review of Current Research on Turrets and Curtain of Hadrian's Wall", *Britannia*, 22 (1991), 51-63.

⁴⁹ RIB 1049 and 1091.

⁵⁰ Bidwell, P. T. *et al.*, "Excavations on Hadrian's Wall at Denton, Newcastle-upon-Tyne 1986-9", *AA*⁵, 24 (1996), 23-7.

⁵¹ Wilmott, T., *op cit*, 119.

⁵² Miket, R. and Maxfield, V., "Excavation of T33b, Coesike", *AA*⁵, 50 (1972), 145-78.

⁵³ Hill, P. R. and Dobson, B., "The design of Hadrian's Wall and its implications", *AA*⁵, 20 (1992), 27-52.

⁵⁴ If the author may add a subjective reflection, a recent experience inclines me to feel unhappy about soldiers walking on narrow wall walks. Being used to walking on the unfenced parts of the medieval walls of York, with a reassuring earth rampart at the back, I recently walked on the medieval walls of Alcudia, Mallorca (Roman Pollentia) which are about the same height as York but have a sheer unprotected drop to the rear. The experience was not enjoyable even in broad daylight and fine weather.

⁵⁵ RIB 2117 and 2118.

⁵⁶ Bede, *op cit*, 1. 12. 29.

⁵⁷ Bede, *op cit*, 1. 12. 30.

⁵⁸ Bede, *op cit*, 3. 25.

⁵⁹ Bidwell, P. T. *et al.*, *op cit*, 17-28.

⁶⁰ Hill, P. R. and Dobson, B., *op cit*, 29.

⁶¹ Crow, J. G., *op cit*, 54, for a detailed elevation of this section of Wall.

⁶² RIB 1051.