

## II

# Warfare in Britain and the Building of Hadrian's Wall

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There has long been discussion of the interpretation of the evidence for warfare in Britain during Hadrian's reign.<sup>1</sup> This evidence has generally been used to argue for the existence of two wars in Britain at this time, most recently by Professor Frere, though M. G. Jarrett in 1976 put up a spirited case for but one.<sup>2</sup> This paper offers an alternative way of reconciling the evidence, which has hitherto usually been seen as conflicting. In summary form, this evidence is:

1. When Hadrian became emperor in 117, 'the Britons could not be kept under Roman control'.<sup>3</sup>
2. A coin issue of 119 showing BRITANNIA is usually taken to imply victory in Britain.<sup>4</sup>
3. '[Hadrian] set out for Britain. There he... was the first to build a wall, 80 miles long, to separate the barbarians and the Romans'.<sup>5</sup>
4. A fragmentary tombstone found at Vindolanda records a centurion in a unit of Tungrians who was killed in a war: there was a cohort of Tungrians at this fort from the late 80s into the early 90s and again from 105 perhaps into the 140s.<sup>6</sup>
5. M. Maenius Agrippa was 'chosen by the late emperor Hadrian and sent on the British expedition (*misso in expeditionem Britannicam*)'. He subsequently served as tribune of *cohors I Hispanorum milliaria equitata* based at Maryport.<sup>7</sup>
6. T. Pontius Sabinus was 'commander of three military detachments from legions VII Gemina, VIII Augusta and XXII Primigenia on the British expedition (*expeditio Britannica*)'.<sup>8</sup>
7. Cornelius Fronto recorded the loss of many soldiers in Britain during Hadrian's reign. Fronto compared the scale of the losses to those during the Jewish War of 132-5.<sup>9</sup>
8. Hadrian's Wall was narrowed from a width of 10 Roman feet to 8 Roman feet or less during its construction.<sup>10</sup>
9. P. Hill has adduced evidence for a break in the construction of Housesteads fort, Birdoswald fort and MC 37 (Housesteads), the later work being of inferior quality.<sup>11</sup>
10. T. Wilmott has found a layer of soil covering the incomplete Hadrianic buildings in the fort at Birdoswald.<sup>12</sup>
11. J. Casey has linked the Nike issues of coins by the Alexandrian mint during Hadrian's ninth and tenth years, 124/5 and 125/6, to warfare in Britain as being the only part of the empire where it is possible that there was warfare at this time.<sup>13</sup>

Frere has pointed out that the word '*expeditio*' when used in a military context is invariably associated with active campaigning against the enemy. It is naturally employed very frequently of *imperial* campaigns, but by no means exclusively so. The visit of Hadrian to Britain in 122... occurred at least two years after the end of the British War, and is an entirely inappropriate context for description as an *expeditio*.<sup>14</sup> Frere argued for a later date for the *expeditio* than 117-9, suggesting that the withdrawal of troops following the completion of the Wall may have facilitated a northern uprising; this later date, he contended, being supported by the career of Sabinus, which indicates 'a date of

about a decade later [than 117] for the *expeditio*, and the fact that Agrippa was sent (*misso*) to Britain and therefore could not have accompanied the emperor in 122.<sup>15</sup>

A new interpretation is now offered for the separate and random pieces of evidence cited above, which include material not considered by Frere, and utilising a reason offered by C. E. Stevens nearly 40 years ago for the decision to narrow the Wall, namely warfare on the northern frontier in 124 and 125.<sup>16</sup> It must be stated that this interpretation cannot be proved; it is merely one more attempt to produce a solution which reconciles all the evidence.

Following the successful completion of warfare in Britain at the beginning of Hadrian's reign, the emperor came to the island in 122, probably arriving shortly before 17 July 122 and construction of the Wall commenced immediately.<sup>17</sup> In 1968, I was co-author of a paper which suggested that the first work on the Wall occurred in 122 or, as the visit was relatively late in the summer, the following year, though Stevens had argued that work actually began before the emperor's visit.<sup>18</sup> Believing that the building of the Stone Wall commenced at Newcastle, I argued that the work undertaken in the first season (122 or 123) was the stretch from Newcastle to about milecastle 7, with the first full season of work running from that point to about milecastle 22. I have since been party to an argument that the building of the Stone Wall commenced at Dere Street, that is beside milecastle 22, and that therefore the first full season of work was the 15-mile block running east thence to milecastle 7, leaving the sector to the east to be built later.<sup>19</sup> The fact that not all the block of work from milecastle 7 to milecastle 22 appears to have been completed<sup>20</sup> may be thought to lend support to the proposal that the first season was indeed the shorter building period available in 122. The next tranche of work on the Stone Wall, that between Dere Street and the River Irthing, was not finished before the decision was taken to add forts to the Wall. This significant change is likely to have been for military operational reasons, that is, to aid troop mobility as the new linear barrier would

have hindered the ability of the regiments based in the forts on the Stanegate from moving swiftly northwards beyond the Wall, and this is underlined by the unique position of many of the forts, astride the Wall. The decision was subsequently made to narrow the Wall and it was completed to the new gauge, as can still be clearly seen at many points between milecastle 26 and the river Irthing (milecastle 49).

The evidence now offered by Tony Wilmott and Peter Hill for a break in fort building is another new factor to be taken into account. The occurrence of the soil line covering the lowest courses of the buildings in the fort at Birdoswald, and the change in standards of workmanship at that fort and at both Housesteads and milecastle 37 (Housesteads), suggests that work at these sites was not far advanced before it was halted.<sup>21</sup> On the basis that the original plan was to build the Stone Wall in blocks of about 15 miles long, and that the fort decision appears to have been taken in the second season, the break in fort building will have occurred in 123 or 124 (or just possibly 125), and it was long enough to allow for the soil line to develop over Birdoswald.<sup>22</sup>

Various reasons may be adduced for this break in the building programme. It is not impossible that the troops building Birdoswald and Housesteads were moved away to work elsewhere on the Wall.<sup>23</sup> However, there is an alternative scenario: that the event to which they were called was the *expeditio Britannica*, a campaign which was serious enough to require legionary reinforcements to be sent from the continent. A date of 124/5 for the *expeditio* would fit the career of Sabinus better than 118/9, or even 122, though still falling short of about 128, the date preferred by some scholars.<sup>24</sup> Such a date might also allow Agrippa to serve at Maryport as the first or second tribune following the establishment of the *cohors I Hispanorum* at the site and before the regiment was reduced in size.<sup>25</sup> The *expeditio*, if dating to this time, may have been the warfare recorded in the Nike coin issues of Alexandria (124/5 and 125/6), assuming that the coins do indeed refer to Britain. The warfare

in Britain was certainly serious, as Fronto testified,<sup>26</sup> and the creation of a soil line at Birdoswald may be considered to support a pause in building of least two years. The completion of milecastle 37 (Housesteads) under Nepos, who had been replaced as governor by April 127, provides a closing date for the warfare, unless some building continued on the Wall during the fighting. A break, even of two seasons, would help make better sense of the post-128 building inscriptions at Great Chesters and Moresby, and perhaps help explain the evidence for a break of some duration between the laying of the foundation for the Broad Wall and the construction of the Narrow Wall.<sup>27</sup> C. E. Stevens suggested that the narrowing of the Wall may have resulted from a desire to complete the Wall as swiftly as possible: to this we may now add, following Peter Hill, the poorer quality of work also emanated from this decision.

A draft calendar of events would therefore be:

- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| 117          | Accession of Hadrian. Britons could not be kept under control   |
| 119          | Coin issue indicating successful conclusion of fighting   |
| 122          | Arrival of Hadrian. Building of Hadrian's Wall commences  |
| 123          | Second season; fort decision; warfare?  |
| 124          | ?forts under construction; warfare? Arrival of Pontius Sabinus and Maenius Agrippa: <i>expeditio Britannica</i> |
| 124/5        | Nike coin issue   |
| 125/6        | Nike coin issue   |
| 126/7        | Work resumes on Wall: mile-castles in central sector completed; narrowing of Wall                               |
| 128 or later | Great Chesters and Moresby under construction.  |

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## NOTES

CIL *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*  
 RIC *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, vols. 1–10, eds. H. Mattingly *et al.*, London, 1926–1994.

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dr Brian Dobson, Mr P. R. Hill and Mr T. Wilmott for helpful discussions.

<sup>2</sup> S. S. Frere, 'M. Maenius Agrippa, the *Expeditio Britannia* and Maryport', *Britannia*, 31 (2000), 23–8; M. G. Jarrett, 'An Unnecessary War', *Britannia*, 7 (1976), 145–51. Jarrett's line was also broadly followed by A. R. Birley, 'A new tombstone from Vindolanda', *Britannia*, 29 (1998), 302–3. E. Birley, *Roman Britain and the Roman Army*, Kendal (1953), 28–9 argued for 'two distinct periods of trouble in Britain under Hadrian'.

<sup>3</sup> *Historia Augusta*, *Hadrian* 5, 2.

<sup>4</sup> *RIC* 577a, 577b.

<sup>5</sup> *Historia Augusta* 11, 2.

<sup>6</sup> A. R. Birley, *A new tombstone from Vindolanda*, 299–306.

<sup>7</sup> *CIL* XI 5632 = *ILS* 2735; *RIB* 823, 824, 825 and 826.

<sup>8</sup> *CIL* X 5829 = *ILS* 2726.

<sup>9</sup> Cornelius Fronto 2, 22.

<sup>10</sup> D. J. Breeze and B. Dobson, *Hadrian's Wall*, London (2000), 59.

<sup>11</sup> T. Wilmott, *Birdoswald, Excavations of a Roman fort on Hadrian's Wall and its Successor Settlements; 1987–92*, London (1997), 57–60, 67–9; P. R. Hill, 'Hadrian's Wall: Some aspects of its execution', *AA* <sup>5</sup>, 19 (1991), 33–9.

<sup>12</sup> Wilmott, *Birdoswald*, 57–79

<sup>13</sup> J. Casey, 'The coinage of Alexandria and the chronology of Hadrian', in H. Havelin, M. Christol and G. Gautier, *Mélanges de numismatique offerts à Pierre Bastien a l'occasion de son 75 anniversaire*, Wetteren (1987) 65–72.

<sup>14</sup> Frere, *Agrippa*, 25.

<sup>15</sup> In arguing for a later date based on the careers, Frere was following E. Ritterling, 'Legio', in *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, vol. 12, Stuttgart (1925), 1668–9 and E. Birley, *Roman Britain and the Roman Army*. The careers of Roman officers (and soldiers) normally followed certain 'rules' and applying these rules would suggest that Sabinus did not come to Britain as early as 117 or even 122.

<sup>16</sup> C. E. Stevens, *The Building of Hadrian's Wall*, Kendal (1966), 50–3.

<sup>17</sup> *CIL* XVI 69 records that soldiers discharged under the governor Pompeius Falco received their discharge certificates under Platorius Nepos. Nepos came to Britain from Lower Germany, where he had been governor: Hadrian came from the same province and it usually presumed that the two travelled together: Breeze and Dobson, *Hadrian's Wall*, 64. Breeze and Dobson, *Hadrian's Wall*, 25–87 consider the evidence for the building of the Wall.

<sup>18</sup> J. Hooley and D. J. Breeze, 'The Building of Hadrian's Wall: A Reconsideration', *AA*<sup>4</sup>, 46 (1968), 110–1; Stevens, *Building of Hadrian's Wall*, 39.

<sup>19</sup> D. J. Breeze and P. R. Hill, 'Hadrian's Wall Begun Here', *AA*<sup>5</sup>, 29 (2001), 1–2.

<sup>20</sup> C. M. Daniels, *Handbook to the Roman Wall* 13th ed., Newcastle upon Tyne (1978), 18; R. Hunneystett, 'The Milecastles of Hadrian's Wall: An Alternative Identification', *AA*<sup>5</sup>, 8 (1980), 96.

<sup>21</sup> It might be argued that three separate pieces of evidence do not form a general phenomenon. However, I prefer to follow the Dorothy L. Sayers' method of arguing: two clues are a coincidence, three a fact.

<sup>22</sup> If this evidence had been available to Hooley and Breeze, their chronology would have led to the pause in fort building occurring in 124, 125 or 126.

<sup>23</sup> The narrow and broad walls at Gilsland Vicarage Garden (MC 48 – T 48a) were found to be 'a homogeneous mass of mortared rubble': F. G. Simpson, 'Excavations on Hadrian's Wall in the Gilsland-Birdoswald-Pike Hill Sector, 1927', *CW*<sup>2</sup>, 28 (1928), 385. This has been taken to suggest that there was no break here in the building programme. However, as it has subsequently become clear, much of the original bonding material for the Wall was clay, there remains the possibility that the mortar core in

the Gilsland Vicarage Garden results from a later rebuild.

<sup>24</sup> Ritterling, *Legio*; Birley, *Roman Britain and the Roman Army*; V. A. Maxfield, *Roman Military Decorations of the Roman Army*, London (1981) 196; K. Strobel, 'Rekonstruktion der Laufbahn des C. Velius Rufus', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 64 (1986), 276, n. 58, cited by Frere, *Agrippa*. B. Dobson (pers. com.) considers a date of 124/5 acceptable. See also n. 15.

<sup>25</sup> D. J. Breeze 'The regiments stationed at Maryport and their commanders', in R. J. A. Wilson, *Roman Maryport and its Setting*, Kendal (1997), 67–89 offered an interpretation of the relationship between the cohort and the fort, arguing that the large size of the fort suggests that its first occupant was the cohort when a thousand strong and before it was reduced to about half that size by the removal of a detachment.

<sup>26</sup> As recently emphasised by A. R. Birley, *A new tombstone from Vindolanda*, 303.

<sup>27</sup> *RIB* 1736 and 801. Such a break has been most recently noted at Peel Gap where Jim Crow recorded that 'the Broad Wall culvert was blocked on the south side and a deep layer of peat and silt developed before the construction of the Narrow Wall': J. G. Crow, 'A review of current research on the turrets and curtain of Hadrian's Wall', *Britannia*, 22 (1991), 55.