

III

Warfare in Britain and the Building of Hadrian's Wall: a Problem

Tony Wilmott

SUMMARY

A recent attempt was made to reconcile evidence for breaks in the construction of Hadrian's Wall and for warfare in Britain during the reign of Hadrian. This model deployed evidence for a break in the construction of the stone fort at Birdoswald. The complex sequence at Birdoswald shows that the primary fort was constructed of timber, and this would be the fort under construction when the break observed elsewhere took place. Another explanation is therefore required for the break in stone fort construction.

In a recent article, David Breeze (2003) marshalled a group of 'separate and random pieces of evidence' relating to the building of Hadrian's Wall and to warfare in Britain during the reign of Hadrian in an attempt to reconcile these into a coherent narrative. One of the pieces deployed is the existence of a break in the building of the stone fort at Birdoswald, which is seen as belonging to the same period or phase of work as similar breaks attested through stonemasonry analysis at both Housesteads and Milecastle 37. The purpose of this note is to demonstrate that the Birdoswald evidence cannot fit into Breeze's draft calendar as stated (Breeze 2003, 15).

The history of the construction of the fort of Birdoswald is now well established through excavation during the years 1987–1992 (Wilmott 1997) and 1997–2000 (Wilmott 1999; 2000; Wilmott, Cool, and Evans forthcoming) and can be summarised:

1. A possible signal tower was built to the south east of the later fort (Richmond

1931, 130), possibly as part of a group of advanced stations, intended to signal back to forts on the Stanegate.

2. The construction of the turf Wall together with its northern ditch and the stone built turret 49a. This phase probably also accounts for a polygonal ditched and palisaded enclosure on the promontory, now interpreted as a construction camp for the builders of the turf Wall (Wilmott 1997, 51; Wilmott, Cool, and Evans forthcoming). Prior to this construction the Birdoswald promontory was covered with dense woodland, which had to be felled in order to construct the linear barrier. So rapid was building that the pollen contained in the buried ground surface beneath the Wall had no chance to degrade before the Wall was built (Wiltshire 1997, 39).
3. The construction of the first fort, probably in timber. The evidence for this is growing. The earliest recognised was a clay rampart discovered beneath the south east wall and rampart of the stone fort (Simpson and Richmond 1933, 252–254) and the presence of occupation debris in the primary stone fort rampart, which hinted at earlier Roman occupation. In addition, the morass in the dip in the centre of the fort site was filled and made up before this primary fort was built (Richmond 1931, 127). The sequence beneath the western end of the northern stone fort granary showed an early structure which may have comprised a large post-in-trench construction (Wilmott 1997, 48), and which was cut by an unfinished foundation of a stone fort building. In a previous report, I suggested (Wilmott 1997, 53–54, fig 24) that the early fort was small, and did not project to the

- north of the turf Wall. Subsequently, a number of pits have been found in the *praetentura* of the stone fort, the fills of which were stratigraphically sealed by the earliest features and deposits of the stone fort. These contained Hadrianic or later pottery, a legionary enamelled belt plate, and a number of leather shoes of a style thought to be later Hadrianic. This indicates that the early fort projected north of the Wall, as did its successor, and allows us to add two further observations (which were previously puzzling) to the archaeology of the early fort. In 1929, major excavations in the south east *praetentura* of the stone fort revealed a phase ('Level 0') consisting of a drain and 'carpenter's chips' (Richmond and Birley 1930), and in 1987–1992, excavations in the south west *praetentura* revealed a similar phase this time comprising stake-holes, woodchips and a fragment of wattling. Both of these lay above the back-filled turf Wall ditch and beneath the Hadrianic stone buildings. If the primary timber fort followed the backfilling of the ditch and projected to the north of the Wall line, then this is the obvious context for these observations.
4. The Vallum was probably built to respect this early fort. This suggestion was first made by Haverfield (1897, 416) who thought that the Vallum ditch ran too close to the south west corner of the stone fort to be associated. The precise layout of the Vallum was recovered in 1932 (Simpson and Richmond 1933, 247–52), when it was shown that the Vallum was diverted to skirt a fort on its south side, and that a primary causeway of unexcavated material was provided to serve the south gate of this fort. It was thought that the fact that the fort ditches cut the back-filled Vallum ditch indicated that the Vallum could not have functioned with the stone fort. Recent excavation, however, has established a closer chronology (Wilmott, Cool, and Evans forthcoming). It is now clear that the Vallum ditch was filled and sealed by AD 150. The back-filled ditch was then itself cut by a well-constructed stone-lined drain and a series of pits, and these were cut in turn by the excavation of the three primary fort ditches after AD 160–170. The Vallum could have served with the stone fort during the Hadrianic period, therefore, as the ditches were clearly not excavated (and thereby the stone fort completed) until after the withdrawal from Antonine Scotland. The remaining argument for the Vallum predating the stone fort is therefore its proximity to the south west corner, and consequent issues of stability.
 5. The stone fort was begun. Lower courses of the exterior walls were built. Stone-masonry analysis clearly shows three standards of work on the large masonry of the fort gates. The first two were not very dissimilar, the second being merely less carefully finished than the first. There are a variety of possible explanations for this; perhaps they reflect seasonal working, or the circulation of building gangs with differing skills. The third masonry type was a very poor piece of work, and could not relate to the same building campaign as the first two. The halt in work represented by the change came when the main west gate was completed except for its *spina*, the main east gate lacked its voussiors alone, the south gate may have been completed, the east *porta quintana* lacked its south pier, and the western *porta quintana* had only its foundation blocks.
 6. The break in work cited by Breeze (2003) took place. The crucial evidence was found in the principal west gate, where the western foundation block of the west pier of the *spina* was of the high standard of the first masonry type. A deposit of black soil stratigraphically post-dated this block and antedated the eastern block, which was of the very poor later type. This showed very clearly that the gate was unfinished when the black soil was deposited. The soil (referred to elsewhere (Wilmott 1997, 73) as the 'hiatus horizon') has been found across the entire *prae-*

tentura of the stone fort. Analysis showed that this was a naturally-accumulated humose soil. The early stages of this accumulation were accompanied by continued activity on site with the newly developing soils having a significant anthropogenic component. A period of undisturbed plant growth and 'normal' soil development undoubtedly followed (McHugh, Wiltshire and Wilmott 1997, 77). Though the fort area was abandoned at this time, subsoil morphology shows that abandonment was not prolonged.

7. Completion of the fort. The gates were completed using poor-quality masonry. The abundance of carbonised plant debris within the hiatus soils show that vegetation was cleared through burning. The soils were then rapidly sealed beneath the fort's internal roads and the floors of the buildings that were now built.
8. Replacement of Turf Wall in stone from milecastle 49 to milecastle 51, butting the north corners of the stone fort at Birdoswald. The dating evidence for the primary occupation of the stone wall turrets and milecastle 50 has recently been reviewed (Willis forthcoming), and confirms a Hadrianic date. As lateral access south of the linear barrier was now provided by the principal east and west gate, the single portal *portae quintana* were demolished and walled up. The fact that these gates were fully built, complete with voussoirs, indicates that the stone fort functioned at least for a while with the turf Wall as the linear barrier.

That the whole of this sequence is Hadrianic is shown by the Hadrianic date of the stone Wall interval structures added after the construction of the stone fort. Despite this there are aspects of the archaeology of Birdoswald that suggest that the stone fort was not fully complete and functioning until after the Antonine withdrawal from Scotland. The area close to the principal west gate ultimately occupied by granaries appears to have been empty during the early period. An unfinished buttressed

foundation on this site demonstrates the intention to build that was not fulfilled until the early third century (Wilmott 1997, 84). Similarly the sequence close to the south west corner of the fort now shows that the primary stone fort ditches were not provided until after c. AD 160–170 (Wilmott, Cool, and Evans forthcoming).

Breeze's (2003) paper does not mention the chronology for the turf Wall, but elsewhere (Breeze and Dobson 2000, 86) he proposes that this element was begun in 123. The turf Wall was completed at Birdoswald, as was the stone turret 49a. This is shown by the large mass of turf which was deposited into the turf Wall Ditch before any fort construction took place, and by the existence in the original wall of a primary Hadrianic stone fort building of a reused centurial stone, which must have originated from the demolished turret (Wilmott 2000, 46–47), as this was the only pre-stone fort stone-built structure from which the stone might have come. Unfortunately the backfilled Ditch was not bottomed, so there is no indication from silting of precisely when the turf Wall was demolished to make way for the first fort.

If we agree with Breeze (2003) that the decision to place forts on the Wall took place during the second season of work (i.e. in 123), then the first conclusion must be that the turf Wall was begun from the Irthing westwards at the same time as its stone counterpart in 122 (and not in 123 as suggested by Breeze and Dobson 2000, 86). The fort begun at Birdoswald following the fort decision was the timber built fort. Though as yet poorly understood as it has been little sampled, its existence is beyond doubt. Whether it was completed is a different question, though the fact that it was occupied in some form is borne out by the rubbish pits in the *praetentura* and the occupation rubbish found reused in the primary rampart of the stone fort. If the work on the forts was interrupted by warfare in 123–124, then it was the timber fort that was under construction (or possibly completed). At Housesteads and at milecastle 37 the primary installations were stone, and the change in

masonry quality there can therefore be taken as evidence for a break in work at this early date. The similar evidence at Birdoswald cannot be this early. The only sealed dating evidence for this phase, which also provides a *terminus post quem* for the stone fort, is certainly Hadrianic, but with a bias towards the later part of the reign, as noted above. This bias is suggestive, as it implies that the timber fort was occupied for a period of years before the decision to build a stone fort. This second fort decision at Birdoswald caused work to begin on the gates and curtain wall to a high standard of finish. This soon stopped, however, and the fort was left abandoned long enough for a true soil to develop within its walls.

The real significance of this halt may be that a fort had existed and been manned at Birdoswald prior to the decision to build in stone, and that this garrison was withdrawn and moved elsewhere, and the fort deserted. This is very unlike the situation at Housesteads where the primary fort was unfinished, and therefore never garrisoned, before the break occurred. It could be argued that the actual withdrawal of an existing garrison from Birdoswald is a rather drastic course of action which might indeed reflect the need for troops to conduct warfare elsewhere. It terms of the length of the stratigraphic sequence leading up to the cessation of building, a context in the later 120s would be a better fit. If one was to argue a historically documented context for this, one might revisit the argument that the *expeditio Britannica* in which M Maenius Agrippa served took place in 128–129 (Frere 2000, 26).

The part of the stratigraphic sequence at Birdoswald culminating in the rapid completion of the gates and the construction of internal buildings and roads in the stone fort is highly complex and very detailed. It reflects bursts of activity and construction, and above all the sheer dynamism of the construction of the Hadrian's Wall frontier. The sequence demonstrates that the builders were 'thinking on their feet', constantly reviewing the building programme and constantly changing objectives during the course of construction as shown by

Symonds' (2005) recent illustration of prioritisation in the construction of milecastles, particularly with reference to the evidence for starts and stops in the construction of milecastle 35. It shows that halts took place, and presumably that manpower was redeployed for other purposes elsewhere, possibly for building work, possibly to deal with threats and to go to war. Unfortunately the fine detail of the recorded sequence cannot be matched by archaeological dating methods, which are by comparison very coarse and imprecise. The closest dating that we can provide for the sequence is to say that it began with the initiation of the construction of Hadrian's Wall, no earlier than 122, and that it was completed when the turf Wall was rebuilt in stone, allowing the primary occupation levels of milecastle 50SW and its accompanying stone Wall turrets to take place in the later Hadrianic period, say *c.* 136–140. This means that all of these changes took place within a period of 16 to 18 years. It is possible to suggest that some of the finds evidence shows a bias to the later part of this period, but any division of the sequence into periods of a couple of years can only be guesswork.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BREEZE, D. J., 2003 'Warfare in Britain and the building of Hadrian's Wall', *AA*⁵, 47, 15–32.
- BREEZE, D. J., and DOBSON, B., 2000 *Hadrian's Wall*, 4th ed., London.
- FRERE, S. S., 2000 'M. Maenius Agrippa, the *expeditio Britannica* and Maryport', *Britannia*, 31, 23–28.
- HAVERFIELD, F., 1897 'Report of the Cumberland Excavation Committee 1896', *CW*⁷, 14, 413–433.
- MCHUGH, M., WILTSHIRE, P. J., and WILMOTT, T., 1997 'Analysis of hiatus soils', in Wilmott (1997), 73–79.
- RICHMOND, I. A., 1931 'Excavations on Hadrian's Wall in the Birdoswald-Pike Hill Sector, 1930', *CW*², 31, 122–134.
- SIMPSON, F. G., and RICHMOND, I. A., 1933 '1. Birdoswald', in 'Report of the Cumberland Excavation Committee for 1932; Excavations on Hadrian's Wall', *CW*², 33, 246–262.
- SYMONDS, M., 2005 'The construction order of the milecastles on Hadrian's Wall', *AA*⁵, 34, 67–78.

- WILLIS, S., forthcoming 'The Samian associated with Turrets 49b, 50a and 50b and Milecastle 50: a Review' in Wilmott, Cool, and Evans, forthcoming.
- WILMOTT, T., 1997 *Birdoswald: Excavations of a Roman fort on Hadrian's Wall and its successor settlements: 1987-92*, [English Heritage Archaeological Report, 14], London.
- WILMOTT, T., 1999 'Birdoswald' in P. Bidwell (ed.) *Hadrian's Wall 1989-99*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 145-57.
- WILMOTT, T., 2000 *Birdoswald Roman Fort: 1800 years on Hadrian's Wall*, London.
- WILMOTT, T., COOL, H., and EVANS, J., forthcoming, 'Excavations at the Hadrian's Wall fort of Birdoswald (*Banna*), Cumbria: 1996-2000', in T. Wilmott (ed.) *Hadrian's Wall: English Heritage Research 1980-2000*, [English Heritage Archaeological Report].
- WILTSHIRE, P. E. J., 1997 'The pre-Roman environment', in Wilmott (1997), 25-40.

