



II

Hadrian's Wall and the defence of North Britain

Mark Corby

SUMMARY

The defence of North Britain is considered from the viewpoint of a modern army officer. Hadrian's Wall played only a minor role compared to that of the cavalry in the Advance Forts; the effectiveness of their patrols to the North of the Wall is stressed, in a strategy that relied upon reconnaissance, concentration and interception.

'North Britain was not attractive, even to people who saw their purpose as ruling the world.' (Breeze 1988, 20)

THE AUTHOR SERVED AS AN INFANTRY OFFICER in the British Army during the Cold War in Germany, the insurrection in Northern Ireland, and the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. Service in Berlin, Belfast, and Nicosia — all cities divided by some form of 'wall' — provided the author with practical experience of how such walls operate in a military and civil context, and their relevance (or otherwise) to the larger strategic picture. The principles of warfare — speed, concentration, surprise, reconnaissance etc. — remain the same as they were two thousand years ago (Maurice 1929, 26–50). Only the technology has changed. The commander will always need to know where the enemy is, his strength and his likely intentions, in order to make an appreciation of how to destroy him. It is essential that this information is gleaned at the first opportunity to allow the maximum time for concentration, response and, if possible, surprise. The Duke of Wellington referred to this as 'guessing what was on the other side of the hill' (Croker 1884, 276).

Any discussion as to the primary purpose of Hadrian's Wall is of course handicapped by the lack of sufficient data. However, using such data as does exist (mainly the physical evidence), it is possible to make a tentative military evaluation of how the Romans proactively defended North Britain. This paper will stress, on the basis of the current evidence, the comparatively minor part played by Hadrian's Wall in the defence of North Britain, particularly in the third century, whilst highlighting the crucial importance of the forts deployed well to the north of the Wall, the 'Advanced Forts' (or 'Outpost forts'). It should be stressed that by the time the Wall was constructed in the 120s, the Romans had been campaigning in, and had had a thorough knowledge of, the area to the north of the Wall for at least thirty years. Not only could they evaluate the potential hostility of certain tribes, but by a thorough knowledge of the ground they would be able to predict with some degree of certainty the likely strength and direction of any attack.

Besides the terse statement that the Wall was built to separate the Romans from the barbarians (*Historia Augusta, Life of Hadrian* 11, 2), we have no real idea as to whether there was any strategic planning (or a lack of it) behind this decision. However, it is often assumed that because of the immense logistic effort expended (but little fiscal cost) in constructing a wall



of 80 Roman miles, it must have been built to be defended, regardless of the fact that this contradicts nearly everything we know about Roman warfare. Perhaps this is understandable, given the current orthodoxy that it is axiomatic that military walls are designed to be fought from, and defended (Hodgson 2009, 42–5).

Paradoxically however, based on the available evidence, Hadrian's Wall defies this description. This wall was not meant or even designed to be fought from, even if it did possess a wall-walk fighting platform (Hodgson 2009, 42–5), except under the most desperate of circumstances, when all other measures, including the full deployment of a field army, had been thoroughly defeated. This is tellingly revealed in the intricacy of the initial design of the Wall, its garrison and the later relationship between it and the screen of Advanced Forts sited well to the north. The initial Wall plan, presumably Hadrian's personal plan (Breeze, 2009), was a contradiction in terms. Conventionally, in order to eliminate any weak point, a wall has the absolute minimum number of gateways, as each represents a potential point of weakness; yet here we find them at every mile. Why? Two reasons are normally given for this extraordinary anomaly. Firstly, to provide easy access through the Wall for the army, located in a series of forts on the Stanegate, roughly two miles (3 km) to the south. If this is correct it clearly indicates an intention to fight in the open, to the north of the Wall, and not on it. However, it must have proved very irritating indeed, and a Staff Officer's nightmare, to manoeuvre a field army through a mesh of gateways at one-mile intervals. Secondly, to facilitate (friendly) civilian movement through the Wall in both directions, whilst still being able to monitor this traffic and, if necessary, interrupt it or perhaps even tax it. The Wall itself, at perhaps 4 m (13 ft) in height, fronted by a ditch 3 m (10 ft) deep and 9 m (30 ft) wide, was certainly a deterrent to itinerant *banditti* and the like, particularly if accompanied by animals, but it was not, nor was it meant to be, a serious military obstacle to a major attack on the province. That was the sole responsibility of the field army, initially stationed behind the Wall, which would have patrolled aggressively well beyond the Wall, perhaps for a distance of 25 miles (40 km) or more. Additionally, three Advanced Forts were established on the western flank at Birrens, Netherby and Bewcastle (fig. 1). These forts may have been primarily placed to protect friendly tribes now north of the Wall (Breeze 1982, 77) but the units based within them will also have been capable of patrolling to the north and west. The essence of patrolling will have been to detect the enemy far enough away to allow the field army time to concentrate and to deploy sufficient forces well to the north of the Wall.

The notion of fighting a field engagement to the north of the Wall is entirely in keeping with the Roman practice of maintaining the offensive at all times (Goldsworthy 1996, 114), giving full advantage to their superior training, tactics and leadership. However attractive it may seem to have attempted to fight 'on' the Wall, militia-style, it would have meant an abrogation of everything the Roman army stood for and a complete degeneration of tried and tested standards for no appreciable military advantage. Whatever the function of the Wall, our knowledge of the Romans' preferred method of combat, almost certainly means it was not a major defensive structure in either the strategic or the tactical defence of North Britain.

In the event, the initial plan was quickly jettisoned in favour of one in which the army moved up to and garrisoned the Wall by placing a series of new forts on or across it at approximately seven-mile (11 km) intervals. The three Advanced Forts remained. Hardly had this radical change of plan been completed before the Wall was effectively abandoned as part of the Antonine 'surge', which saw the frontier advance 100 miles (160 km) to the north and go firm on the Forth-Clyde gap, with the building of the Antonine Wall. This adventure was



HADRIAN'S WALL AND THE DEFENCE OF NORTHERN BRITAIN

11

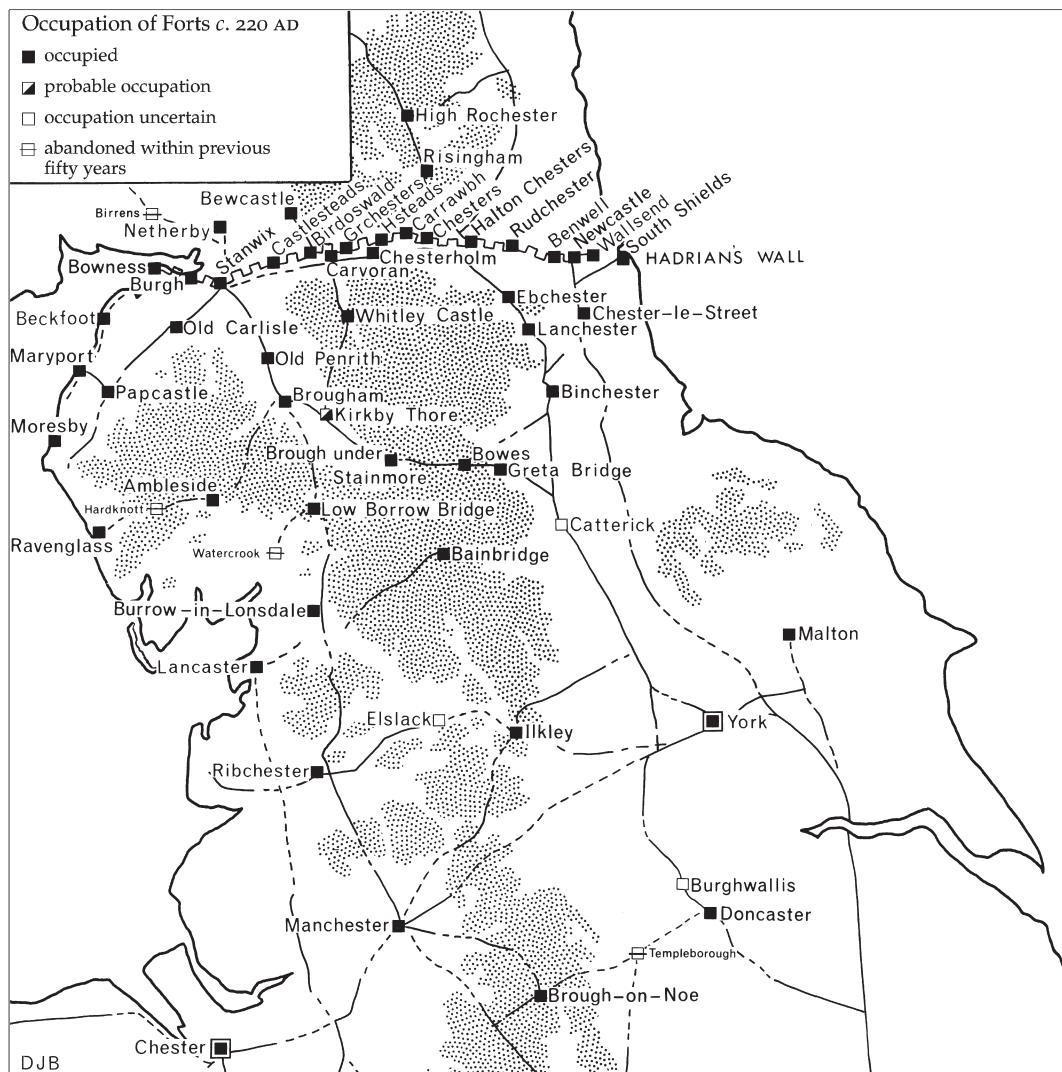


Fig. 1 Military deployment in northern Britain about 220. The legionary bases are marked by double squares.

short-lived and the army had returned to Hadrian's Wall by the mid 160s. Over the next 40 years, which included a brief period of conflict in the 180s, the opportunity was taken to make a number of modifications to the Wall. A lateral road immediately behind the Wall was provided, although not for wheeled transport, which will have continued to use the Stanegate. A large number of turrets were abandoned whilst some of the milecastles had their gateways reduced in width so that they were no longer suitable for wheeled traffic. The Advanced Forts to the north of the Wall were now fixed at two on the eastern flank, High Rochester and Risingham, and two on the western flank, Netherby and Bewcastle (Breeze 1982, 138). Their role, as before, may have been to offer some protection to friendly local tribes, but of far

greater importance will have been their ability to dominate the ground for at least 50–100 miles (80–160 km) north of the Wall by aggressive patrolling. The major campaigns of Septimius Severus in the early third century do not seem to have altered these arrangements. After nearly a century the optimum solution for the defence of North Britain had finally been reached.

Fortunately, the evidence for the third-century garrisons of the Wall forts and the Advanced Forts is particularly good (Breeze and Dobson 2000, 147). The 16 forts on or close to the Wall had a combined paper strength of some 10,700 men, of whom 3,400 were cavalry. The four Advanced Forts had a combined strength of at least 4,200 men, of which a minimum of 1,500 were cavalry. The five forts on the Cumbrian coast add a further 3,000 men, of whom 500 were cavalry. This gave a total of about 18,000 men, of whom nearly 5,000 were cavalry, representing nearly 28% of the total. This high percentage of cavalry gives this force superb reconnaissance and patrolling potential over a huge area beyond the Wall, to both the north and south. Mobility was and is the key strength of cavalry; however they were normally powerless against first-class infantry. Fortunately no such infantry existed amongst the tribes of North Britain but, rather, an enthusiastic rabble that the Roman cavalry would have chastised with ease. Thus an enemy approaching from the north would first have had to evade the Advanced Forts, three of which (High Rochester, Risingham and Netherby) were garrisoned with a *cohors milliaria equitata*, a unit of 800 infantry and 500 cavalry that today would be called a battle group. These battle groups will have had an individual capability of defeating an enemy force of up to 3,000 men. Thus a hypothetical attack on the eastern flank, using Dere Street as its axis, would probably have needed in excess of 7,000 men to have any chance of overcoming the combined force of the two *cohors milliaria equitata* (stationed at High Rochester and at Risingham, 22 miles (34 km) and 11 miles (17 km) to the north of the Wall, respectively) that block their line of march. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that there is no evidence that the Lowland tribes ever presented a serious threat to the Romans. That threat, on the very rare occasions when it did materialise, came from the Highlands (Breeze 1982, 98).

For a Highland force to reach the Wall it had first to defeat the battle groups stationed in the Advanced Forts, and then overcome nearly 11,000 men stationed in the 16 Wall forts. Such a large barbarian force would be faced with enormous logistical problems, not the least of which would have been in feeding itself. By its very nature it would be slow-moving, achieving perhaps no more than 10 miles (16 km) a day, and it would be impossible to conceal. It would almost certainly be detected a minimum of 50 miles (80 km,) if not more, from the Wall by cavalry patrols from the Advanced Forts. The Romans would then have approximately five days to concentrate sufficient forces to intercept the enemy and to bring him to battle on ground of their choosing, well beyond the Wall. It would seem that in the third and fourth century these factors were sufficient deterrent to preclude any such major attack.

It has, however, been suggested that the Romans would allow an attacking force to penetrate as far as the Wall, where its garrison would delay it whilst a counter attack was organised. It is also suggested that the 'defenders on the Wall-top' had a role of 'initial observation, and communication' (Hodgson 2009, 44–5). To surrender the initiative to the enemy by allowing him to attack the Wall at the point of his choosing makes no military sense. It would effectively divide the Roman forces on the Wall and make a coordinated counter-attack both slow and extremely difficult, with the Wall itself being a major hindrance to movement. Flexibility would be sacrificed for no advantage whatsoever. As to the claim that Wall-defenders had a role of initial observation, by the time they saw anything it would be far too late and



the enemy would be upon them! It is perhaps worth recalling that the Roman army's preferred method of warfare was to seize the initiative and go on the offensive as soon as possible regardless of the risks (Goldsworthy 1996, 90–5). This spirit of sheer, naked, aggression would never have tolerated a major enemy attack ever reaching the Wall.

Not surprisingly, the third century appears to have been peaceful, and whilst the military solution was not the sole reason for such a benign state of affairs it undoubtedly played a part. This in turn leads to the question of what was the Roman army doing when not facing the extremely unlikely possibility of a major attack? The day-to-day control of North Britain will have revolved around a relentless routine of patrolling, both by the infantry and more effectively by the cavalry. Such military action that did take place probably fell into the category of low-intensity operations, which in itself is only a euphemism for cattle-theft and petty banditry, a tradition that seems to have flourished mightily in this area up until the seventeenth century. Here at least we can see the Wall as an effective barrier against cattle-thieves and the like. Small numbers may have been able to approach the Wall undetected and even cross it, but to return laden with booty, particularly livestock, would have been extremely hazardous.

In conclusion, therefore, in the third century at least the Wall was only a minor part of a much larger defensive-offensive system that relied on reconnaissance, concentration and interception. The Wall itself had little part to play except as an impressive bureaucratic barrier and an irritating deterrent to thieves and to other *banditti*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BREEZE, D. J. 1982 *The Northern Frontiers of Roman Britain*, London.
 BREEZE, D. J. 1988 'Why did the Romans fail to conquer Scotland?', *PSAS*, 118, 3–22.
 BREEZE, D. J. 2009 'Did Hadrian design Hadrian's Wall?', *AA⁵*, 38, 87–103.
 BREEZE, D. J. and DOBSON, B. 2000 *Hadrian's Wall*, London.
 CROKER, J. W. 1884: *The Croker papers: the correspondence and diaries of the late Right Honourable John Wilson Croker, LL.D., F.R.S., Secretary to the Admiralty from 1809 to 1830*, ed. Louis J. Jennings, London, vol. 3.
 GOLDSWORTHY, A. 1996 *The Roman Army at War, 100 BC–AD 200*, Oxford.
 HODGSON, N. 2009 *Hadrian's Wall 1999–2009*, Kendal.
 MAURICE, F. 1929 *British Strategy*, London.

