

Roman forces and native populations

David J Breeze*

INTRODUCTION

Roman forces in newly conquered territory had two functions, to control the new provincials and to protect them from attack. The Romans were a pragmatic people in both peace and war. Accordingly, analysis of the position of these forces, as reflected by the location of the forts where they were based, ought to provide information about the enemies of Rome as the forts will have been related both to the distribution of population and to possible routes of attack. There are, however, other considerations. The army needed to be supplied. Higham (1982, 108) has suggested that the distribution of forts in Cumbria, for example, reflects a desire to forward local provisioning for each regiment through careful spacing and a close relationship to good agricultural land. The pre-eminent power of the army too meant that it need not necessarily maintain a local presence to ensure control: people might be controlled simply by knowledge of the latent – and not always latent – power of the army (Luttwak 1976, 195–200).

It would be possible to examine specific areas to try to determine what the disposition of Roman forces might inform us about native population distributions, native power bases and possible invasion routes. However, the building of both Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall provides opportunities to examine the arrangements of military forces whose distribution was planned and executed within limited periods. Both Walls were built after the Romans had been in the north for over 40 years. They knew their enemy and they knew the terrain. The disposition of the military forces along both Walls therefore ought to have been a controlled reaction to the other side, to the potential threats and to the distribution of population.

In undertaking this exercise it has to be emphasized that the establishment of great linear barriers like Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall blurred two wholly separate functions. The main aims of the Roman army in constructing linear barriers, be they of stone, turf or timber, were to control the movement of people into and out of the province – to divide the barbarians from the Romans (*Historia Augusta*, *Hadrian*, 11, 2) – and to restrict, and if possible prevent, low intensity threats such as raiding (Luttwak 1976, 61–6). The barriers themselves and the soldiers charged with forwarding the above aims could not prevent a major invasion of the province. That could only be dealt with by the army units which were based in the forts in northern Britain. In the event of a major invasion these units would combine to form an army which would operate in the field where it would seek to obtain victory, while on a day-to-day basis they would be tactically useful against low-level threats. Some of these army units were based in forts actually on the line of the barrier. This arrangement was, however, something of a matter of convenience. These units would not attempt to defend the barrier, an impossible task and one for which they were not effectively equipped, but join the field army.

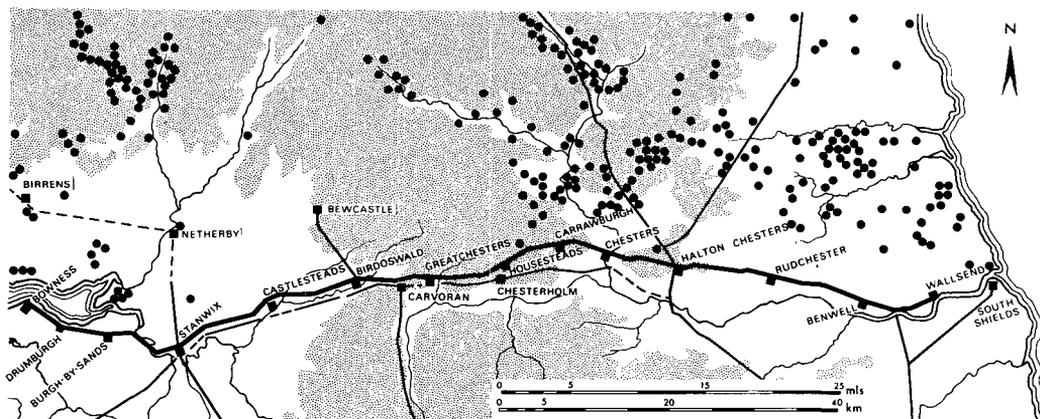
*HBM, 20 Brandon Street, Edinburgh

We are fortunate that much work has been done through survey, and to a rather lesser extent excavation, to inform us about the Iron-Age peoples in the lands to the north of both Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall. The Campsie Fells and the Kilpatrick Hills, north of the Antonine Wall, lie within the areas of recent Royal Commission surveys (RCAMS 1963; 1978a; 1978b; 1979; 1982). The work of Professor George Jobey in Northumberland has led to the publication of a series of surveys and excavations of the Iron-Age and Romano-British settlements in that county (cf Jobey 1982 for a recent survey). To the west Professor Jobey has surveyed Eskdale (Jobey 1971) and the Royal Commission Eskdale and Ewesdale (RCAMS 1980), while Dr N Higham and Professor G D B Jones's aerial reconnaissance on the Solway plain has provided valuable new evidence in that area (cf Higham & Jones 1985, 68–98 for a recent survey). As a result we have a reasonably reliable picture of the pattern of Iron-Age and Romano-British settlements north of both Walls: the gaps, we can be assured, are not the result of no field work but are 'positive' negatives.

On the other hand little sensible can be said about routeways. We know nothing of the possible land routes of the Iron-Age peoples of the north; passage by sea may have been regarded as more important (Scott 1951, 25–7). Evidence of a kind may come from Hadrian's Wall. The distribution of the forts on or near Hadrian's Wall believed to have been destroyed in the late second century during an invasion of the northern tribes, suggests that the enemy came south along Dere Street (Gillam 1974, 10). This, however, is hardly evidence for pre-Roman movement. Secondly, probably in the early fourth century, a new gate was inserted in Hadrian's Wall, the Knag Burn gate, near Housesteads. This may be connected to local farming, local troop movements, or more long distance movement: archaeology is mute on the reason for its construction.

HADRIAN'S WALL

North of Hadrian's Wall there was extensive settlement on the Northumbrian plain, the foothills of the Cheviots and the river valleys and again on the north side of the Solway basin and up the valley of the Esk. North of the centre of the Wall the population was much sparser. The Bewcastle Fells were as empty then as they are today; hence the establishment of the Spadeadam rocket testing base here in the post-War years. A lack of people, however, should not be equated with a lack of significance. This is amply demonstrated by Bewcastle, on the edge of Spadeadam Waste. Here lay a



ILLUS 1 Hadrian's Wall in the 130s. The dots indicate known and possible settlements of Iron-Age and/or Romano-British date

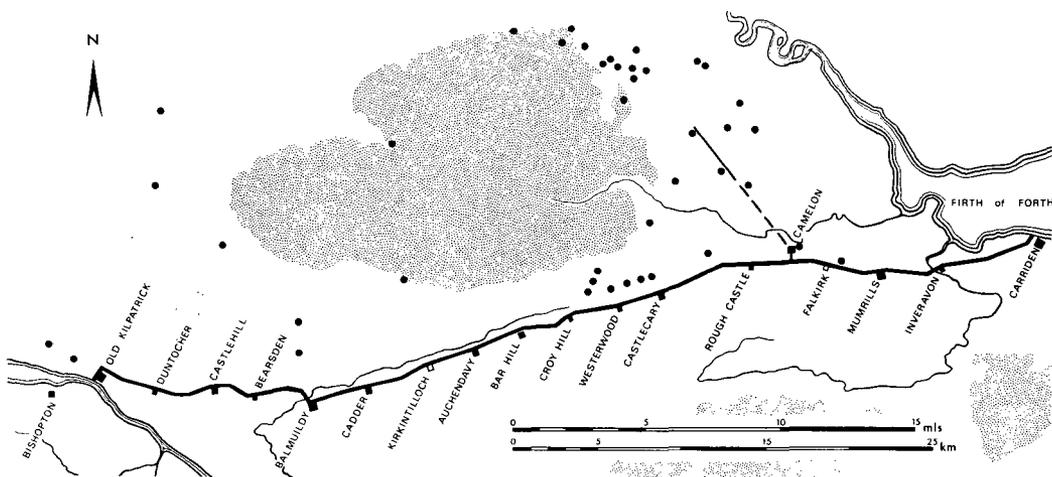
Roman fort, Anglian cross and medieval castle, all attesting an importance not obvious from population distribution maps.

The forts at first placed along Hadrian's Wall show no special relationship to any area to the north for they lie at fairly regular intervals of $7\frac{1}{3}$ miles (Swinbank & Spaul 1951; Breeze & Dobson 1978, 46–7). North of the west end of the Wall lay three forts, probably placed to protect those parts of the tribe of the Brigantes cut off from the rest of the province by the construction of the Wall rather than act as advance warning posts (Breeze & Dobson 1978, 43). Before the end of Hadrian's reign, however, it seems that three new forts were added to the original plan, significantly changing the balance of forces. These forts were Carrawburgh, attached to the Wall, and Carvoran and Chesterholm-Vindolanda on the Stanegate, both apparently rebuilt late in Hadrian's reign, probably changing an earlier plan to abandon the two sites when new forts were built on the Wall line itself (Breeze & Dobson 1978, 52; Bidwell 1985, 6–10).

Carrawburgh seems to have been added to the original series to break an otherwise long gap of 9 miles between Chesters and Housesteads. No such considerations seem to have affected the placing – or retention – of regiments at the other two sites. Chesterholm was covered by Housesteads only $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles to the north-east, while Carvoran was but $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Great Chesters to the east and Birdoswald $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles distant to the west across the River Irthing. These new forts markedly altered the pattern of units along the Wall, increasing the forces in the central sector, where the army looked out to the largely 'empty quarter' to the north.

THE ANTONINE WALL

The eastern 4 miles of the Antonine Wall ran along the raised beach overlooking the Firth of Forth. For the next 8 miles splendid views to the north were obtained over the relatively flat valley of the Forth and its tributaries. From Castlecary, perched on the watershed of the Forth and Clyde basins, to the west end of the Wall, 24 miles distant, the Campsie Fells and the Kilpatrick Hills lay north of the Wall, obscuring any wider outlook, and broken only by the Blanefield Gap. There appear to be very few Iron-Age settlements on these hills. The valley between the Campsies and the



ILLUS 2 The Antonine Wall about 150. The dots indicate known and possible settlements of Iron-Age and/or Romano-British date

Wall was boggy until modern times and presumably the same in the Roman period, and thus would have been largely unpopulated. The main areas of settlement known north of the Wall lie between the eastern edge of the Campsies and the Forth.

The first plan for the Antonine Wall seems to have provided for the construction of only six roughly equally spaced forts along the barrier (Gillam 1975). Before completion of this scheme, however, the number of forts was increased by at least 10. It has generally been assumed that the new forts led to a spacing of a little over 2 miles between each establishment. This, though, is based upon the assumption that forts remain to be discovered in the eastern half of the Wall, at or near Seabegs, Falkirk and Kinneil, and that the remains located at Inveravon by Professor Anne Robertson (1969) formed part of a fort and not a fortlet. In fact, it is possible that a regular series of forts at 2 mile intervals was neither planned nor constructed (Breeze 1980, 52). Although the discovery of Roman artefacts in Falkirk may point to the existence of a fort there, extensive searches at Seabegs and at Kinneil have failed to locate forts there, though at both sites fortlets have been discovered. It is possible that the small size of forts which may have existed at these two sites has rendered them susceptible to modern destruction, but this, combined with the known small size of Rough Castle, and the presumed smallness of Inveravon, is not without significance.

It is noticeable that the main weight of the forces based on the Antonine Wall lay in the central and western sectors, and in particular between Bar Hill and Balmuildy. I have previously suggested that the weakness of forces in the eastern sector might reflect the existence of the outpost forts to the north (Breeze & Dobson 1978, 96); these pointed towards the main enemy in the north throughout the Roman period, the Caledones and their successors the Picts. However, the first plan for the Wall shows no weakness to the east, rather the reverse, while the presence of the outpost forts would still not explain the strengthening of the forces along a stretch of Wall which looked out on to empty hills. In this second scheme for the Antonine Wall no attempt seems to have been made for a regular distribution of forces along the Wall line. Rather the reverse seems to have been the case. The Antonine Wall changed from having a regular series of forts to having an irregular distribution of forces.

DISCUSSION

The pattern of forces along both Walls changed as the new frontier complexes were constructed. It is remarkable that on both Walls changes in plan led to an increase in the number of troops in those sectors which looked out on to relatively unpopulated landscapes. It might have been expected that the greater weight of forces on the Walls would lie in those areas of greatest population density, but that was not the case. Nor, in view of the probability of travel by sea, were the maritime flanks of the Antonine Wall specially protected, though on Hadrian's Wall the frontier dispositions, though not the barrier itself, were continued for some miles down the Cumbrian Coast. It is not possible to know why neither Wall was planned from the beginning along the lines it was finally to adopt – it may be that in both cases the original plans were too regular and rigid without sufficient regard for local circumstances – but there are several reasons which might account for the eventual strengthening of Roman forces at particular points.

Mr R J Mercer has pointed out to me that it would be in keeping with modern military practice to position reserve forces in the centre of the line ready for rapid deployment either to east or west. There is, however, no hint from any of the Roman linear barriers of such considerations. What evidence we have – though it dates from before the establishment of linear barriers – suggests that when groups of units were centrally placed, so as to serve as mobile strike forces, they were located on the main lines of communication, for example at Antioch on the major route to and from Parthia, and

on the Rhine beside the access routes into Germany. None of the additional forts on either Wall contained particularly strong forces, which might have been expected if they were to serve as strategic reserves. In fact many of the forts added to the Antonine Wall were not large enough to hold a complete auxiliary unit. On Hadrian's Wall, Carrawburgh was added with the clear intention of closing an over-long gap between two existing forts. Finally, if a central reserve had been felt necessary on Hadrian's Wall it might have been expected that one would have been provided from the first on the Antonine Wall. However, the regularity of the first plan for the Antonine Wall made no allowance for a central reserve. The irregularity of the second implies a greater application of local conditions.

It might be suggested that on both Walls the additional units were placed away from centres of population and farm land so that the army would cause the least social and economic disruption. Such considerations, however, do not usually appear to have affected the Roman army which in the East often billeted its soldiers in towns and, as Higham has shown, in Britain seems to have preferred to place forts within close proximity to good agricultural land which might supply many of its food requirements (Higham 1982, 108)

It seems that another reason has to be sought for the irregular distribution of forces on the two Walls. I suggest that the areas of relatively densely populated landscape, peopled by farmers, were relatively easy to control. The movement of strangers would have been readily noticed, and budding insurrections soon common knowledge. Chiefs could be controlled by Roman bribes, or coercion, while informers no doubt added a further dimension. Roman patrols would have reminded all of the nearby power of Rome.

The open, unpopulated, lands were a different matter. Raiders, invaders, dissidents, all could move freely here with no local eyes to observe their movements. Only Roman eyes could keep watch in such areas: these were the lands over which the Roman army particularly needed to maintain watch and ward. Thus the strength of the army was increased along those sectors of the frontiers which faced on to the unpopulated hills.

If this analysis is correct the distribution of forces along the two Walls does indeed tell us something about the other side, but the relationship is more subtle than might at first appear.

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