

A ROMAN LEGACY

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From around AD 140 to 160, the Antonine Wall protected the north-west frontier of the Roman Empire. Historic Scotland takes a glimpse at what remnants tell us about the most complex and highly developed frontier construction of its time.

Before it was abandoned in the early AD 160s, for a reason we still do not know, the Antonine Wall was one of only three artificial frontiers built by the Romans to protect their European provinces. The others were Hadrian's Wall and the German Limes.

The Antonine Wall was the most complex and highly developed of all frontiers constructed by the Roman army. Following its abandonment, the Roman army was never again to build such a complex frontier system. At the time, its special position appears to have been recognised by distance slabs that recorded its construction, running from Old Kilpatrick on the Clyde to Carriden on the Firth of Forth. Their remains represent a brazen statement of imperialist aggression and are a unique testimony on any frontier to the power and might of Rome.

Little is known about the man who controlled the destiny of millions of people for 23 years—a longer reign than any of his predecessors except the Emperor Augustus—and who in Scotland ordered the construction of the Antonine Wall. However, we are certain that the chosen successor of Hadrian was borne Titus Aurelius Fulvus Boionius Arrius on 19 September 86. An only child Antoninus held the basic posts of quaestor and praetor, before becoming a consul in 120. Antoninus then held two very senior posts—governor of one of the four provinces created by Hadrian in Italy and proconsul of Asia in 134-5. In 138, without children, Emperor Hadrian made arrangements for succession and named 51 year old Titus Aurelius Antoninus as his heir.



At the beginning of his reign, Antoninus pushed forward the frontier in Britain from Hadrian's Wall on what is now south of the Scottish-English border, to the central belt, between the Clyde and Firth of Forth.

The 'wall' consisted of a running barrier, a turf rampart, fronted by a ditch of varying widths, supported by defensive pits on the berm (narrow ledge). Along the Wall were placed forts. Originally these were intended to average 13km apart but the distance was later reduced to 3.5km. The first plan seems to have included fortlets placed a little over one Roman mile (1.6km) apart; 'expansions', probably beacon platforms; and, in one area, small enclosures of uncertain purpose.

While fort walls and ramparts were provided with a protected wall-walk, no evidence survives to indicate the existence or otherwise of a walk along the running barrier, though it was certainly wide enough to take one. Hadrian's Wall was similarly wide enough to have taken a wall-walk though there is again no certain evidence to its existence. The Roman Army was not equipped to fight from the tops of walls, except in emergency, and even then from fort walls not barriers running for miles. It preferred to seek a military decision in the field where the soldiers' training, discipline and weapons gave them a distinct advantage.

Iron objects have not survived well on the Antonine Wall and few forts have yielded weapons. Two collections stand out-25 javelin-heads or ballista bolts were recovered from Bar Hill, most from the well, 12 arrow-heads and two spear-heads. At Mumrills, eight spear heads were recovered and at Seabegs six Javelin-heads/ballista bolts were found. These hardly provide sufficient evidence for artillery on the Antonine Wall.

The Wall was provided with a road, the Military Way, which appears to have been part of the original plan. It is believed that the Military Way formed the main road through most forts and that its construction, along with the rampart, might have taken only eight months. However, the entire Wall and fortifications may have taken 12 years to complete owing to disruptions in the building programme.

The Wall was built in a particular location because it was the most convenient and useful geographical line. It may not even have marked the northernmost limit of Roman settlement.



Along the line of the Wall 17 forts are known, some built or planned earlier than the rampart and others later. The primary forts are Mumrills, Castlecary, Balmuildy and Old Kilpatrick.

Houses are known to have been built immediately north of Hadrian's Wall, outside three forts. No such evidence has been found on the Antonine Wall, though a probable field system of Roman date has been recorded north-west of Auchendavy, near Kirkintilloch. It would certainly come as no surprise if more evidence was found for such Roman activity in the northern lea of the wall.

The Wall sat firmly within a military landscape, stretching beyond its immediate environs, at least as far north as Bertha on the River Tay, with at least four outpost forts. Although their purpose is not entirely clear, they may have been to protect provincials living beyond the linear barrier.

The forts themselves vary considerably in size from tiny Duntocher to Mumrills, which was capable of holding a cavalry regiment—the ala I Tungrorum: 500 men and their horses. This is in contrast to both Hadrian's Wall and the German frontier, where each fort appears to have held a complete unit (500 men), and as a result were more similar in size. The internal arrangements also varied more than the other two frontiers.

Each fort formed a small enclosure protected by a rampart and several ditches. At two forts the rampart was a stone wall, but elsewhere it was of turf, sometimes with a stone base, and occasionally noticeably wider than the Antonine Wall rampart.

The number of ditches ranged from one to four and were generally broken at the fort gates, but in some instances the ditches continued across the front of the entrance without a gap. At Bar Hill, unusually, an extra short ditch provided additional defence at the east gate.

The gates were normally simple, single portal entrances, often without flanking towers. And while corner towers are known, they weren't always provided. Each fort contained a headquarters building at the centre and on the right, there was usually a commanding officer's house. There were also granaries made of stone, and barrack blocks and storehouses built of wood.

The materials used to build forts were obtained locally-usually sandstone and timber, which were freely available. The number of barrack blocks is often a guide to the size of the unit stationed at a particular fort.

On the Antonine Wall, the regimental bath-house was often inside the fort. In Balmuildy, this was replaced by an external bath-house and at several forts bath-houses were erected in an annexe. Latrines, where they are known, tend to be associated with the bath-house.

The fort was the base of the soldier, who by local standards was well paid. Pay was issued three times a year at special parades and, when he joined, he had to buy his own weapons and pay for the share of the tent used on campaigns. Money was thereafter deducted from wages to cover food and bedding, the camp dinner at Saturnalia (now Christmas) and the burial club.

A duty undoubtedly undertaken by the soldiers would have been the maintenance of forts and the buildings within. Excavations have shown that many were amended or repaired, often more than once. Soldiers at the fort of Vindolanda on Hadrian's Wall are recorded building a bath-house and a hospital, while among raw materials listed are stones, rubble, lime, clay, lead and timber. Other finds related to the Wall include religious artefacts such as altars to the gods of Rome. The most significant collection of alters was found in 1771 during the excavation of the Forth-Clyde Canal.

The people on the Wall included civilians, as literary sources show that the Roman army on campaign had camp followers, presumably settled outside the new fort.

By the 160s the Wall was abandoned and the army fell back to re-occupy Hadrian's Wall. Why the most northerly frontier in the Roman Empire was moved south is unknown. What is certain is that archaeologists and historians will continue to argue about the northward advance and withdrawal and new evidence will be found in the future to alter our perceptions.



'The Antonine Wall' by Professor David Breeze was published in 2006. The book includes detailed accounts, a gazetteer, photographs and a list of museums containing finds from the Wall. The book is published by Birlinn Ltd, in paperback form.