

THE ANTONINE WALL: CONSTRUCTION AND DISTANCE SLABS

Construction

The approximate line of the Antonine Wall was first determined during AD 77-84 during Agricola's campaigns against the Caledonii.

The Antonine Wall was built during the reign of the Emperor ANTONIUS PIUS (138-161 AD). This Emperor did not wage war willingly; from Peausanius (Mann & Penman 1985,28) we learn that the Wall was deemed an advance of frontier from Hadrian's Wall to Central Scotland as a political necessity early in his reign.

The Wall ran from Bridgeness (or Carriden?) on the Forth estuary to old Kilpatrick on the River Clyde, a distance of over 40 Roman miles (about 37 Imperial miles). It followed the course of Agricola's open frontier (*limes*) boundary of some 60 years previous. The Wall was probably completed under the auspices of Quintus Lollius Urbicus by early AD 143.

The rampart of the Antonine Wall (probably 10 feet X 6 feet top-width) was largely built of stone turf blocks in the *murus cespiticius* style but mostly on a stone base at least 14 feet wide. A roughly parallel ditch some 20 feet or more (berm) to the north was generally formed in V-section (c.40 ft width at top X c 12 feet central depth) whilst to the south, generally some 45 yards inside the rampart, ran the Military Way (road c 17 feet wide).

A series of defensive structures, from major forts down to fort lets, watchtowers and small enclosures or expansions, was constructed, mainly attached to the rear of the rampart. However, numerous inscribed building stones survive from several of these but unlike distance slabs, they do not as yet form a cohesive catalogue of building events.

The construction was from east to west with the Wall most likely preceding the Ditch and was built over 3 seasons. Legion XX was present as a vexillation (A company of troops under one vexillum) and Legion II and Legion VI were present at half this strength as 4 cohorts each. Season I terminated at Hag Knowe and Season 2 at Hutcheson Hill.

The Roman military surveyors (*mensores*) would have measured with *perticae* (rods) called *decempedae* of 10 Roman feet length (Dilke 1985) and

Dilke (1971, 73) quotes Hero as saying that “ropes and cords, twice taughtened, the smeared with wax were used for long distances” (possibly along the berm).

Distance Slabs

Some 20 have been found with possibly 13 yet to be discovered. The distances on the Slabs were recorded in Roman paces to the East and in Roman feet to the West of Castlehill. The elaborate decoration on certain slabs would appear to define the beginning and end of construction seasons and the state of hostilities at these times, whereas all other slabs are relatively plain. It is likely that the Distance Slabs were mounted at fort let positions or on plinths and suggestions are made for those apparently missing fort lets in Dr Alastair Strang’s book adverted to below.

The Slabs are tablets of local sandstone and can be substantial in size. They were mounted in pairs on the South side of the Wall and are usually inscribed to the dedication of Antonius Pius by the legionary wall-builders and sometimes include ornate scenes of decoration, which were probably coloured. The Slabs appear to have been subsequently buried by the departing Roman troops, mainly to the south of the rampart in the direction to which they apparently belong and have usually been recovered during ditching or ploughing operations. Within the Roman Empire they are a unique series of epigraphic testament, recording organised military construction and related accomplishment. On those recovered so far however, no consular dating or number of tribunican powers granted have been recorded leaving only indirect dating possibilities. This also applies to the complementary building-tablet inscriptions from forts, etc, including the two from Balmuildy mentioning Lollius Urbicus.

More information in the Slabs of the Antonine Wall can be found in the book described below and from which the foregoing narrative has been sourced by kind consent of the author.

Reference Source:

The Distance Slabs of the Antonine Wall 2007
(The deduction of their most likely disposition)
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