

THE ROMAN PERIOD

A Roman army led by Julius Caesar first invaded southern England in 55 B.C., but this was only a brief expedition and the Roman force soon retreated to continental Europe. A second invasion followed almost a century later, in 43 A.D., this time carried out with the intention to establish the Roman province of Britain. Having quickly conquered much of the south of the England, the Romans moved to establish friendly relations with British tribes in central parts of Britain, notably the Brigantes and constituent groups such as the Tectoverdi and Lopocares who controlled much of present Northern England. However, after a domestic dispute between Queen Cartimandua and her consort, Venutius led to civil war amongst the Brigantes in A.D. 69, the new emperor, Vespasian sent the Roman governor of Britain, Petillius Cerealis to take over the north. A fortress was established at York in A.D. 71, and within 10 years the native population of the North, including the Brigantes and their neighbours to the north, the Votadini, had been overwhelmed by successive governors, including Iulius Agricola, the successor of Cerealis.

The main route of northward advance took the Roman army from York to Corbridge. There does not seem to have been a substantial Roman presence within the boundaries of modern Tyne and Wear until the construction of Hadrian's Wall over half a century later, although Washingwells Roman fort (HER 143) near Whickham, discovered as a cropmark from aerial views in 1971, is regarded as being of pre-Hadrianic date and there is a suggestion that the origins of South Shields Roman fort are also pre-Hadrianic. It is possible, therefore, that these forts may have played a role in an early frontier system, perhaps based on the Stanegate, a road from Corbridge to Carlisle built in the late 70s A.D. and subsequently fortified, although there is presently no evidence for eastward extension of this route from Corbridge. It has also been suggested that there may have been a crossing point at Newcastle, perhaps defended by a small fort on the north or south bank of the river, although there is little material evidence for this despite recent excavations at both Newcastle and Gateshead.

Having subdued large parts of Southern and Eastern Scotland by 81 A.D., the Romans retreated back to the Tyne-Solway line by the end of the century and during the period of Trajan began to re-use the Stanegate line as a frontier. When Hadrian visited the province in AD 122, five years after becoming emperor, he decided not to attempt another invasion of Scotland but to defend Trajan's frontier by building a wall along the Tyne-Solway corridor. Thus, in the early 120s A.D. work began on the construction of Hadrian's Wall, a linear barrier stretching from the lower Tyne at Newcastle to Bowness-on-Solway on the Cumbrian coast west of Carlisle, a distance of about 70 miles. The wall complex was largely complete by the time Wallsend fort was built at the end of that decade, although the Roman fort at Newcastle was not added for at least another 50 years, that is, sometime in the later 2nd or early 3rd century. The route chosen between Carlisle and Corbridge was a little to the north of the earlier Stanegate line. On the eastern side it was soon supported by a supply base on the coast at South Shields, which, in turn, was connected to the Roman road from Chester-le-Street (and, ultimately, with Dere Street, the main north-south route) by an east-west road, the Wrekendyke.

Hadrian's Wall

The frontier Wall was initially built to consist of a curtain wall, 10 Roman feet wide, with a fortified gateway (or milecastle) measuring approximately 25 metres square every Roman mile (e.g. HER 205), with two

turrets measuring approximately 6 metres square between each pair of milecastles. The milecastles and turrets extended along the Cumbrian coast for about 20 miles beyond the end of the Wall. To the north of the Wall was a v-shaped ditch, 2-7 metres wide and 0.8-3 metres deep, with a drainage slot in the bottom. The contents of the ditch were tipped out on to the north side and smoothed out to create a counterscarp bank. The berm - the space between Wall and ditch - has been found at Wallsend, Byker, Throckley and Newcastle to have contained a complex of pits. At Byker there were three rows of such pits, each holding two stakes, called cippi.

It remains unclear whether, as seems likely, forts were initially planned to be part of the frontier complex or added as an afterthought. Either way, they were constructed very soon after the completion of the curtain wall. The forts initially constructed on the line of Hadrian's Wall within the boundaries of Tyne and Wear were Wallsend (HER 198) and Benwell (HER 208), with South Shields (HER 914) acting as a supply base on the south side of the river. Newcastle may initially have been chosen as the eastern terminus of the wall, prior to its extension to Wallsend, and a bridge, Pons Aelius (HER 450), was constructed there as a crossing point. The fort later constructed at Newcastle (HER 204) may have been partly in order to defend the bridge and civilian settlements that had grown up around it. The wall complex as a whole had multiple functions, including military base, defensive barrier, look-out post, symbolic monument and customs post, the emphasis perhaps changing over time, depending on the state of the empire and local military conditions.

An earthwork known as the vallum, a steep-sided flat-bottomed ditch, 6 metres wide x 3 metres deep, flanked by two mounds, each 6 metres across, was added later to the south side of the Wall, although it has not been found and is likely not to exist between Newcastle and Wallsend. Outside the forts there were civilian settlements (vici). The Military Way, built of large stones surfaced with gravel, seems to have been added between the curtain wall and vallum in the mid-2nd century. Despite a probable period of abandonment in favour of the Antonine Wall in Scotland in the 2nd century and further campaigns in Scotland subsequently, Hadrian's Wall remained the northern frontier of the Empire until the end of the Roman period.

Civilian Settlement

Civilian settlements known as vici grew up around many of the forts on Hadrian's Wall, particularly in the later Roman period, and their remains have been detected at Benwell (HER 5262), Newcastle, Wallsend (HER 806) and South Shields (HER 891 and 892-90, etc.). Such settlements do not seem to have been constructed to a formal plan, often meandering along roads or the riverside, or to have contained many substantial buildings, but they do seem to have supported large populations engaged in various economic activities, including low-level industrial production and trade. These settlements were economically dependent on the Roman forts and do not appear to have survived for long when the Roman garrisons ceased to be an economic presence at the end of the Roman period. Apart from the vici, no other Roman civilian settlements are known in the region.

The Native Population

Despite the presence of the Roman army in north-east England, archaeological evidence shows that the indigenous, or native population was slow to change its lifeways. The pattern and character of settlement

continued as it had done in the Iron Age, with small groups of roundhouses surrounded by rectangular enclosures formed from wooden palisades or earth banks. The remains of roundhouses dated to the 2nd century A.D. have been excavated at Tynemouth Priory (HER 119) and many other rectilinear sites of suspected Roman date have been recorded from aerial photographic evidence in the county (e.g. HER 172-7). The populations of these enclosed settlements were totally reliant on farming for their livelihoods, and the evidence suggests that contact with the Roman military or Romanised civilian populations was minimal, particularly in the 1st and 2nd centuries. There is very little evidence for the existence of Roman civilian populations away from the military sites, although stray finds of Roman artefacts are common throughout the region and a number of hoards, or collections of artefacts have also been found (HER 341 and 351). No trace has yet been made of the sort of farm complex common in southern Britain known as a Roman villa.

Religion and Burial

As well as building roads, towns and forts, the Romans introduced to the region soldiers with their various cultural influences and manifestations, including new religious beliefs and burial practices from across the Empire. This resulted in the introduction of many new gods and goddesses from mainland Italy, such as Jupiter, Mars, and Minerva, and from the provinces, such as Mithras from Persia and Jupiter Dolichenus from Syria (e.g. HER 120, 818-20 and 827-8). Many fragments of alters, statues and temple remains have been found within the military forts and, particularly, the vicus areas associated with the forts at South Shields, Benwell, Wallsend and Newcastle (e.g. HER 1438, 5262 and 5266). In the reign of Constantine the Great, the Romans also introduced Christianity to northern Britain, and by 314 A.D. York was one of a number of important places in the Roman empire with a Christian bishop. Christianity remained, however, only one of a number of religions accepted within the Roman Empire and it is not known how many Britons were converts to Christianity. While some parts of the native population, speaking a Celtic language resembling modern Gaelic, may have adopted more exotic religions introduced from other parts of the Roman empire, others continued to practice their native 'pagan' religions and deities, some of which, such as Belatucadrus and Mogons, were adopted by the Roman army. In the vicinity of Roman forts, native Britons intermarried with Roman soldiers enlisted from far flung corners of the Roman empire like North Africa and Dalmatia, thereby encouraging the spread of alternative beliefs into the native population.

The burial practices of the native British population were little altered by the new forms of burial introduced by the Romans and have left few traces. Cremation burials (e.g. HER 903) seem to have been the norm during the first few centuries of Roman rule in the north-east, with the ashes of the dead sometimes buried in pots or stone-lined graves and sometimes marked by carved gravestones. In the later period inhumation burial (e.g. HER 902) became more common, with bodies being placed in lead coffins or stone-lined graves.

The End of Roman Rule

The final century of Roman rule (A.D. 300 to c.410) was increasingly a time of disorder and warfare, with damaging raids from north of the frontier, such as those occurring in the 360s, reflecting a wider malaise in the Empire. The level of investment in the frontier gradually decreased during this period, although the forts were maintained and adapted in order to continue their function, and a new floor in the principia at Newcastle, dateable to 388 A.D. or later, is a rare example of late 4th century building activity. It is likely

that the size of garrisons reduced as payment became less regular and soldiers were taken away from Hadrian's Wall to fight elsewhere in the Empire. By the time Britain was finally abandoned to its fate around 410 A.D. many of the remaining soldiers would have been of native stock or considered themselves at home on the northern frontier, and in the absence of anywhere else to go would have stayed put, settling down as subsistence farmers. There is some evidence for the Roman way of life continuing for some time, however, notably at South Shields until well into the 5th century (HER 915-6).