

## Obituary

### Eric Birley

Eric Birley was born at Eccles in Lancashire on 12 January 1906 and was educated at Clifton College and at Brasenose College, Oxford. Here he fell under the spell of R G Collingwood and, as an undergraduate, went to excavate on Hadrian's Wall in 1927. Eric's first dig was at Birdoswald and it was there in 1928 that he learnt that he had obtained a first in Greats. Following graduation he spent a brief period working for the Society of Antiquaries of London, observing construction work in the City of London, before returning north to take up the post of Director of the Durham University Excavation Committee. In 1932 he was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, demonstrating his commitment to Scottish archaeology by compounding for life. In 1980 Eric Birley was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Society.

In 1929 Birley was part of the team excavating at Birdoswald during which two inscriptions were discovered. These two stones (*RIB* 1909 and 1912) led to a re-dating of the Wall periods. Although Simpson was the director of the 1929 excavation, it was Birley who brought the significance of these inscriptions to public attention. His elucidation of the four Wall periods has formed the basis of all subsequent work on the chronology of Hadrian's Wall.

Eric Birley's definition of the Wall periods led to an immediate rejoinder from Sir George Macdonald. Macdonald, then aged 68 and a figure of immense authority, took the 24-year-old to task, chiding him on the accuracy of his scholarship and differing on the interpretation of the evidence relating to the governorship of Julius Verus (AD 155–8). The Hadrian's Wall periods enunciated by Birley in 1930 led the chronology of that frontier out of synchronicity with that proposed by Scottish archaeologists for the Antonine Wall, and that difference was to remain for over 40 years.

The first clash took place in what was to become Birley's home territory, the pages of *Archaeologia Aeliana*, the journal of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne, of which Macdonald was an Honorary Fellow. The next was on neutral ground: the *Journal of Roman Studies*. In *The Roman Wall in Scotland*, the second edition of which was published in 1934, Macdonald refined his position on the end of the first occupation of Scotland, placing it about AD 104–6, in the reign of Trajan. Davies Pryce and Eric Birley, using the evidence of samian ware, argued for a date before the end of the first century. In 1937 Macdonald returned to the fray, citing the literary evidence to support his preference for a Trajanic date. The following year, Davies Pryce and Birley brought literary sources, coins, pottery, and the evidence of the structures, to support their view. They failed to persuade Macdonald, as was demonstrated by the final paper in the series which appeared in the *Journal of Roman Studies* in 1939.

In the meantime, Birley and Macdonald had taken up the cudgels about another problem, the date of the end of occupation at the fort at Birrens. The ostensible starting point was Macdonald's discussion of Birrens and the Antonine Itinerary in *The Roman Wall in Scotland*; this had led Birley to start excavating at Birrens in 1936, but I suspect that there was a deeper reason. Since 1930, Birley had extended his views about the Wall periods to other sites, including Corbridge; now he wished to test them on an outpost fort. At Birrens, Birley proved, to his own satisfaction,

that the occupation continued into the third century. Macdonald, reviewing the 1895 excavations as well as those by Birley, preferred an earlier abandonment.

The final score might be rendered one win each, and a draw. All these discussions were about problems which are equally relevant today. It is only with the publication of Hobley's assessment of the coin evidence that we can see that the present evidence suggests a date of about AD 87 for the abandonment of Agricola's conquests, closer to Birley's preferred date than to Macdonald's. On Birrens, Professor Robertson's excavations have supported Macdonald's view. It would be a brave person who believed that the chronology of the second century had been finally determined.

The disputations between Birley and Macdonald ended with the outbreak of war, and with Macdonald's death in 1940. During the 1930s Birley excavated at several sites on or beside Hadrian's Wall, including Vindolanda (he placed the fort in the care of the Office of Works in 1939), the civil settlement at Housesteads, and a number of turrets and milecastles, as well as examining the structure of the Wall itself. After Birrens he excavated at Carzield in 1939 with Ian Richmond. The two also began to re-examine Corbridge, commencing in 1936 a series of excavations which continued (later under John Gillam) until 1973. The reports on these excavations were published regularly in the pages of the local journals and Birley's views were disseminated to a wider audience through his guide-books to Housesteads, Corbridge, and Chesters.

While undertaking a busy excavating programme, Birley was also developing other interests: pottery, epigraphy and the Roman army. The latter two were combined in a paper published in our *Proceedings* in 1936: 'Marcus Cocceius Firmus: an epigraphic study'. He also developed his foreign contacts, visiting the Continent regularly. It was appropriate therefore that he had to be summoned home from Berlin in 1939, ostensibly by a telegram from his wife, but in reality from the War Office.

Birley spent his war service in Military Intelligence. His duties were to examine the careers and promotions of German army officers and to determine and monitor the strength, distribution and movements of the German army. He was head of Military Intelligence Research and ended the War as Chief of the German Military Document Section, with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. In an article in the *Evening Standard* (24 November 1995) Milton Shulman recorded that 'Eric Birley was pre-eminent among those who gave our commanders the information needed to defeat Hitler'. After victory, Birley was able to check his figures against the evidence of captured German documents. These demonstrated that his estimate (made in 1940) was correct, even though this was because one division had been destroyed and another, unknown to him, had been formed.

An archaeologist when he left for war in 1939, Birley returned, fortified by his wartime experience, as a brilliant analyst and interpreter of the Roman army and of Roman military affairs. Virtually his only excavation thereafter was the annual training excavation at Corbridge. Birley left the direction of the excavation to his colleagues, concentrating on the finds, samian continuing to be his primary interest.

Birley had been appointed to a lectureship at Armstrong College, then part of the Newcastle division of Durham University, moving to Durham in 1935; he was appointed Reader in Archaeology and Roman Frontier Studies in 1943. There, in 1947, he became Vice-Master of Hatfield College, succeeding as Master in 1949. Hatfield was in dire straits, but Birley turned the situation round, effectively becoming the second founder of the college. He served as Master until 1956 when Durham awarded him a personal chair in Roman-British Archaeology.

It was during his pre-War visits to Germany that Birley had conceived the idea of a meeting of scholars interested in Roman frontiers: the Congress of Roman Frontier Studies. The outbreak

of War was to postpone its inauguration until 1949, when it was held in Newcastle upon Tyne. Sixteen meetings of the Congress have now been held, including the XIIth at Stirling in 1979. The gatherings have met Birley's aims of bringing together scholars to inform their colleagues and to discuss matters of common interest.

Although he operated on a European stage, the archaeology of northern England always claimed much of his attention. He served the Cumberland and Westmorland Society as its Editor for 10 years (1948–57), and during the 1959 Pilgrimage of Hadrian's Wall was President of both the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne (1957–9) and the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society (1957–60). His handbook for the Pilgrimage, delayed owing to problems in the print industry, was to be enlarged into *Research on Hadrian's Wall* (Kendal, 1961). From 1959 to 1963 he was President of the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland.



Birley contributed regularly to journals on both sides of the Anglo-Scottish border. Many of these papers were concerned with wider issues, and collections were reprinted in *Roman Britain and the Roman Army* (Kendal, 1953) and *The Roman Army: Collected Papers, 1929–86* (Amsterdam 1988). His interest in Birrens led him to write reports for the Royal Archaeological Institute's summer meeting in Dumfries in 1939 and, more significantly, several papers in the *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society* after 1945. Birley's appreciation of the information that could be gleaned from antiquarian accounts was reflected in his articles on Thomas Pennant and on Sir John Clerk of Penicuik.

A natural teacher, he never taught a first degree in archaeology, but students from History, Classics and general courses all came to do his Roman Britain special subject, which included Roman Provincial Administration. Some stayed on to do research and Birley directed his students to carefully chosen problems. Many aspects of Hadrian's Wall were investigated. Provinces and areas were studied in depth. Particular attention was paid to the Roman army and its officers. Artefacts were not forgotten: Birley encouraged research on samian, coarse ware, mortaria and amphorae. Amateurs were also encouraged and were brought into the department. Colleagues from other disciplines were swept up, particularly at Corbridge. Scholars came from abroad to work in Durham or were encouraged by correspondence. As a result, many came to regard themselves as Birley students. His library, files, and time were freely available to everyone and many a research project started with the gift of a Birley archive. He accomplished more through his pupils than he could possibly have done alone. Eric Birley inspired a strong sense of loyalty and comradeship in his students; this is demonstrated by the number of joint papers which they have written, a remarkable achievement in a discipline which has experienced its own share of argument. Birley students went into universities and colleges, and into the state sector. The latter included Kenneth Steer, lately Secretary of RCAHMS, Iain MacIvor, formerly Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments, and the present writer.

Eric Birley retired in 1971, but he continued his research, publishing up to 1993. In 1970 he had accepted the post of Chairman of the Vindolanda Trustees and his support for the work at both Vindolanda and Carvoran continued unabated. He also regularly attended meetings of the Congress of Roman Frontier Studies, of which he had been appointed Honorary Life President in 1974.

Appointed MBE in 1943, he was awarded the Polonia Restituta in 1944 and the Légion d'honneur in 1947. He was elected FSA in 1931 and FBA in 1969; he was an Honorary Fellow of this Society, and of Brasenose College; a Vice President of the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies and of the Yorkshire Architectural and Archaeological Society; a Member of the German Archaeological Institute, and an Honorary Member of Gesellschaft Pro Vindonissa. He was made an honorary Dr Phil at Freiburg University in 1970; honorary DLitt at Leicester in 1971, and Dr, *honoris causa*, at Heidelberg in 1986. His original views of Roman Britain were often at odds with mainstream thought and it is perhaps not surprising that his stature as a scholar was more widely recognised on the Continent than in Britain. In many ways, as an epigraphist-archaeologist, he better fitted the continental pattern of research. Eric Birley had wide interests, but his reputation rests most securely on his work on the Roman army; with his students he created a body of research that is a worthy successor to that of the great Alfred von Domaszewski.

In October 1995 Eric Birley died at Carvoran, also the home of his elder son Robin, and his ashes were buried in the garden at Chesterholm. Birley had married Margaret (Peggy) Goodlet in 1934. He is survived by his wife and their two sons, Robin, Director of the Vindolanda Trust, and Anthony, Professor of Ancient History at Düsseldorf.