

The construction of the Antonine Wall

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ABSTRACT

The involvement of auxiliaries in the building of the Antonine Wall is argued from the evidence of inscriptions.

THE EVIDENCE OF THE BUILDING INSCRIPTIONS DATING TO THE REIGN OF PIUS

In the preparations for, and in the construction of forts immediately after, the advance into Scotland under Lollius Urbicus, work was carried out by II Augusta (*RIB* 1147–8, Corbridge) and auxiliaries (*RIB* 1276, High Rochester, *coh. I Lingonum eq.*). For the construction of the curtain of the Antonine Wall and of the integral fortlets after campaigning was over, the distance slabs indicate that men from all three legions were involved. But while those for VI Victrix and XX Valeria Victrix clearly imply that only vexillations of those units took part, those for II Augusta suggest that the whole legion was present. When the lengths of Wall allocated to each legion are estimated, however, it seems probable that all three legions were responsible for an approximately equal proportion.¹ In this case, if all of II Augusta was present in the north, the availability of some of its men for building elsewhere falls into place. Even while the Antonine Wall was being built, while men from the detachments of VI Victrix and XX Valeria Victrix were fully occupied with the curtain, we see why men could be spared from II Augusta to take part in the building of the primary fort at Balmuildy (*RIB* 2191–2). But at the same time, there were not apparently sufficient men from VI Victrix or XX Valeria Victrix to work on other primary forts, and work was again apparently allocated to auxiliaries: *RIB* 2155 records work done at Castlecary by *coh. I Tungrorum*. If Bar Hill is also a primary fort, as has been argued, work was done there by *coh. I [Baetasior.] c.R.* (*RIB* 2170; Gillam 1975, 51–6). I see no good reason for attempting to relegate the auxiliary building inscriptions (which do not record repair or rebuilding) to a date towards the end of Pius's reign.

At the secondary series of forts on the Wall, even if the decision to add them had been taken at a very early date, there is so far no record of legionary involvement in their building. At Rough Castle, *RIB* 2145 records that the fort's headquarters was built by *coh. VI Nerviorum*. (Of course, if Bar Hill is not a primary fort, auxiliary work there falls into place here also.)

It has been argued elsewhere that Agricola's campaign force in north Britain consisted of the legion IX Hispana, with detachments only of the other British legions and a complement of auxiliary units (Mann 1985, 23–4). It may be suggested that the case was much the same under Lollius Urbicus: his force consisted of II Augusta, detachments only of the other British legions and a complement of

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auxiliary units.² Thus, before and after the campaigns it was mainly men from II Augusta and the auxiliaries who were available for building work. This is what the building inscriptions indicate.

THE EVIDENCE OF OTHER INSCRIPTIONS

If the whole of II Augusta were present before, during and immediately after the building of the Wall, then it will be impossible for inscriptions referring to a *vex. leg. II Aug.* to belong to the same period. A vexillation of a legion was a formally constituted force, under its own standard (vexillum), and its own commander (eg, a senior centurion or a military tribune), operating away from the parent body. It could not operate in the same area, otherwise it could not rank as a vexillation. The vexillations of II Augusta known at Castlecary (*RIB* 2146), Bar Hill (*RIB* 2171) and Auchendavy (*RIB* 218C) must then belong to a different, and presumably later, date. This carries with it the vexillation of VI Victrix on the same stone at Castlecary (this vexillation is also presumably attested in *RIB* 2148 and 2151), and the vexillation of XX Valeria Victrix on the same stone at Bar Hill. The vexillation at Auchendavy is surely in garrison, judging by the dedications of the centurion M. Cocceius Firmus, *RIB* 2174–2177 (cf also the *miles* who died there, *RIB* 2181). None of these records can therefore plausibly be used to supplement the building inscriptions for work done at that date. If the centurion whose wife dedicated at Westerwood (*J Roman Stud.*, 54 (1964), 178, no 7) served with the vexillation of VI Victrix attested at Croy Hill (*RIB* 2160), then they were much more probably in garrison than merely building.

The notion that auxiliaries could not build has become a myth. Auxiliaries were building all over the place under Hadrian – Carvoran (*RIB* 1778, 1816, 1818, 1820, *coh. I Hamiorum*), Bowes (*RIB* 739, *coh. IIII B[reucorum]*), Hardknott (*J Roman Stud.*, 55 (1965), 222, no 7, *coh. II[II De]mater.*) and very probably Carrawburgh (*RIB* 1550, *coh. I Aquit.*). That they should have been involved in the construction of the Antonine Wall should not surprise.

One of John Gillam's great achievements was to demonstrate the development of the Antonine Wall from Hadrian's Wall. But they were not exactly alike, and the student of the Antonine Wall must not be mesmerized into thinking that all details will be a mere repetition. In particular, he must not be seduced by the knowledge that the curtain and primary structures of Hadrian's Wall were all apparently built entirely by legionaries into assuming that the same was necessarily true of the Antonine Wall. The advance north is likely to have strained auxiliary resources when it came to providing garrisons, and seems clearly to have prompted the manning of Antonine Wall structures by legionary detachments.³ At the same time the auxiliaries must now be accorded their due place in the building record.⁴

NOTES

- 1 Distance slabs east from Castlehill: II Aug 3, VI Vic 3, XX VV 2; west from Castlehill: II Aug 2, VI Vic 2, XX VV 6. These figures do not suggest that II Augusta built more than either VI Victrix or XX VV.

For fighting purposes, a legionary detachment may often have been about 1000 strong (*ILS* 2726), that is two cohorts (as perhaps in *ILS* 4195), but for construction work the size no doubt depended on the work being done (only one man per century, it seems, in *ILS* 2483). David Breeze suggested that as many as four or six cohorts of VI Victrix and XX VV were present at the building of the Antonine Wall (Breeze & Dobson 1978, 88–9), although it is worth noting that about AD 138–9 some part of VI Victrix is thought to have been building or in garrison at Chesters (*RIB* 1460–1).

- 2 Although *RIB* 2139, the Bridgeness slab, shows a vexillum in the right hand panel, the inscription on the vexillum reads simply *leg. II Aug.*, as does the main inscription. The vexillum is merely artistic licence – or ignorance. In *RIB* 2184, a rather odd stone which omits the emperor's name and gives the

distance built in a curious combination of paces and feet, *vex.* is improperly omitted before *leg. XX V. V.* This can hardly overthrow *RIB* 2173, 2197–9 and 2208, and *Britannia*, 1 (1970), 309 no 19, as evidence that only a vexillation of XX VV was in fact present.

- 3 The creation of outposts in Tripolitana by Septimius Severus (Ghadames, *IRT* 909; Gheriat el-Garbia, *AE* 1967, 539; Bu-Ngem, *IRT* 913–916) seems in like fashion to have strained the auxiliary resources of the province of Africa, for all three forts had to be manned by detachments of III Augusta (Ghadames, *IRT* 908; Gheriat el-Garbia, *IRT* 985; Bu-Ngem, *IRT* 918–920).
- 4 At least this applies to auxiliary infantrymen. It is worth noting that no inscription from Britain records full-scale building *by* an ala, only *for* an ala (*RIB* 605, 1049, 1465. As Mark Hassall points out to me, *RIB* 1445 indicates small-scale work by a turma). This suggests that tiles bearing stamps with the name of an ala were made for the ala, not by it. (In the two Germanies, even tile-stamps mentioning an ala seem to be missing.)

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