

The history of the Antonine Wall – a reappraisal

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ABSTRACT

Literary, epigraphic and numismatic sources are analysed in order to provide a framework by which the archaeological material from the northern frontier may be tentatively dated.

Consideration of the history of the northern frontier in Britain confirms that we have only two absolutely fixed points, when it comes to the attempt to date archaeological material.

The first fixed point is the building of Hadrian's Wall. The combination of literary and epigraphic evidence which enables us to identify on the ground sites built between about AD 122 and 130 need not be recapitulated here, but that dating is quite secure. The pottery from the lowest levels of milecastles and turrets, all built at the same time, should be identifiable as Hadrianic: the situation is consolidated by the fact that Hadrian's Wall was given up soon after construction, so that it is readily possible to distinguish levels and materials which are, or may be, of later date. Within this short period c 122/130, the archaeology of the sector milecastle 49 to milecastle 51 enables us to identify milecastle 50TW as a short-lived site dating to c AD 122 and a very few years after – before it was replaced by stone wall milecastle 50 to the north, which produced very similar pottery. This must be the most closely dated site in Roman Britain. The vital point to note is that it is only because we are dealing with sites which are being built on *for the first time*, and because the date of that building can be so closely fixed, that we can be so sure of the date of this group of Hadrianic pottery.

The second fixed point is the building of the Antonine Wall. Again, the combination of literary and epigraphic evidence which enables us to identify on the ground sites built in the early 140s need not be rehearsed. Since there was manifestly no Hadrianic occupation of any site on or near the Forth–Clyde isthmus (and no possible occupation for most of the reign of Trajan either), most sites on the Antonine Wall can count as sites occupied *for the first time*. (Flavian material is by and large sufficiently different that any Flavian occupation does not really affect this view.) In theory then, it should be possible to date material from the lowest levels of occupation of sites on the Antonine Wall to the reign of Antoninus Pius. Again, it must be stressed that it is only because Antonine Wall sites are being built on *for the first time* that we can date their earliest pottery to this reign.

Hadrianic levels on Hadrian's Wall, and levels of the reign of Antoninus Pius on the Antonine Wall, are the only levels which can be firmly dated. At no later date do we have an example of a site, occupied for the first time, whose date of construction is absolutely certain. It once seemed as though Carpow might turn out to be such a site, but in fact its date of construction is quite uncertain.

All later levels have, so far, been dated by guesswork. There is simply no way at all of dating levels after the first, on either Hadrian's Wall or the Antonine Wall. Pottery after the middle of the second century cannot be given a firm date. The situation is compounded by the fact that, when the

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pottery from Hadrianic levels on Hadrian's Wall is compared with pottery from the lowest levels on the Antonine Wall, the two groups are found not to be totally distinct. There is a considerable overlap. Potters unfortunately did not, for the benefit of archaeologists, change their styles of pottery with each new reign. Much of the pottery can only be labelled 'Hadrianic/Antonine'.

Pottery can be of some value, in some cases, in providing relative chronologies, but it cannot give absolute dates unless it is in its turn based on firm literary and epigraphic evidence, or is dated by such absolute scientific means as may become available. It must be emphasized that attempts to elucidate the history of the Antonine Wall which in any way depend on pottery have no value.

A firm literary and epigraphic basis has never been available for the period after the middle of the second century. The attempt must be made to see whether it is now possible to supply such a basis. In particular, in default of closely dated pottery, we must also look to see what can be gained from a study of other material, particularly coins: coins are after all dated. But first we must look carefully at the literary and epigraphic evidence.

The vital starting point has to be the inscription of AD 158 which records reconstruction of the curtain of Hadrian's Wall, somewhere between milecastles 11 and 13 (*RIB* 1389). If this stone really came from a fort (eg, Rudchester, a mile or so to the west of its claimed findspot) its value might be questioned (perhaps improperly, see below), but if we accept that it came from the curtain of Hadrian's Wall, and is correctly dated, then we have to accept that Hadrian's Wall was reoccupied as a frontier line in AD 158. With the reoccupation of Hadrian's Wall, the Antonine Wall must have been abandoned. Not only is there no precedent for, or likelihood of, two lines being held at the same time, but the point has been supported by the work of Brian Hartley¹. His study of the different dies used to stamp the work of different potters is what Richard Wright has correctly called 'pure epigraphy'. He demonstrated that the overlap of stamp-dies on pottery from the two Walls is so small that they can never have been held as frontier lines simultaneously. In other words, when one frontier is manned, the other is not.

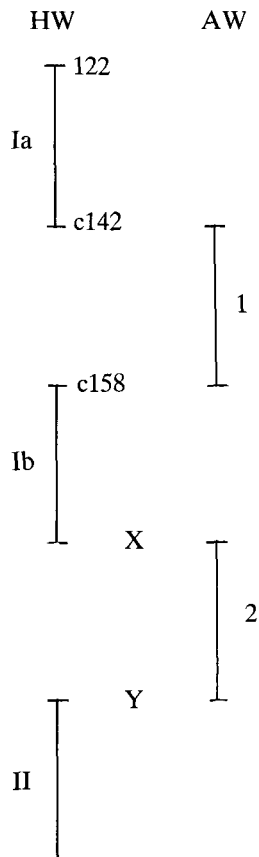
In passing, we may note a further consequence of Brian Hartley's work. He places milecastles and turrets in the same category as forts on Hadrian's Wall, and it appears that we must abandon the view that individual forts on the Hadrianic line could have been held, even when the frontier lay on the Antonine line. This will suggest that inscriptions of Antoninus Pius from Benwell (*RIB* 1330) and Chesters² belong to the years 158/161, at the beginning of the renewed occupation of Hadrian's Wall.

In theory, the evidence of the stamp-dies (none of which is absolutely dated) would not be violated if the Antonine Wall were finally abandoned in 158, and Hadrian's Wall were occupied down to the end of the second century and beyond. But that chronology cannot be correct if there is any material at all which implies an occupation of the Antonine Wall after 158. No dated inscriptions were set up on the Antonine Wall after that date (although several are in a style which could be dated to the late second century, or even to the early third century), but there are a number of coins which have to be taken into account. The following coins, dating after 158, have been reported from Antonine Wall sites:

Date	Metal	Site	Publication	Other references
(1) 160 Marcus	bronze	Cadder	<i>PSAS</i> 68, 28; Clarke, <i>Cadder</i> , 82	<i>RIC</i> 1354 – tr pot xiii
(2) 164/183 Lucilla	silver	Old Kilpatrick granary	<i>PSAS</i> 68, 28; Miller, <i>Old Kilpatrick</i> 33–4	<i>RIC</i> 786 – Venus Victrix (160s?)
(3) 174 Marcus	bronze	Mumrills	<i>PSAS</i> 94, 134	<i>RIC</i> 1107, Cohen 433
(4) 176/192 Commodus	?	Kirkintilloch	<i>PSAS</i> 52, 224	
(5) 176/192 Commodus	?bronze	Bar Hill	<i>PSAS</i> 52, 224	

In assessing the value of these coins, we have to take into account the great decline in the quantity of coins produced after about AD 160. As Sutherland remarked (1937, 33), there is everywhere a sharp drop in the site-finds of coins, ‘beginning with the reign of Marcus’. In other words, in the late second century, people were mostly forced to use coins of the first half of that century. Since there seems in fact to have been a catastrophic decline in coin production – the result of the economic crisis of the late second century – there were few coins of Marcus to circulate, and even fewer of Commodus. We may note in passing that the only coins sealed by the second floor in the barrack-block at Birdoswald, in 1929, were two coins of Trajan (*Trans Cumberland Westmorland Antiq Archaeol Soc*, 2 ser, 30, 174). The paltry number of coins listed in the table above is thus evidence, not of a lack of late second-century occupation of Antonine Wall sites, but merely of the predictable lack of coinage on those sites.

If we now construct a chronological table on the basis of the evidence discussed so far, we have the following (using the conventional HW Ia and Ib for Hadrian’s Wall, and AW 1 and 2 for the Antonine Wall, and leaving out of account the ephemeral third occupation of the Antonine Wall):



The occupation of Hadrian’s Wall which began in 158 (conventionally, period Ib) continued down to a date which we have labelled X, when the second period of occupation of the Antonine Wall began (AW 2). This occupation ended at date Y, when Hadrian’s Wall again became the frontier. The

coins show that Y must lie after AD 176, the earliest possible date for the latest coin known on the Antonine Wall, and probably well after, given the paucity of coins of Commodus anywhere.

A further clue as to the date when the second occupation of the Antonine Wall occurred is, however, provided by the text of Cassius Dio, or rather by the epitome of his history by the rather unintelligent 11th-century monk Xiphilinus. We hear (Dio 76, 12, 1) that 'the Maeatae live close to the wall which divides the island in two, and the Caledonians beyond them'. Cassius Dio was a member of Septimius Severus's *consilium*, a man very close to the centre of things and one who ought to have had access to accurate information about imperial affairs. He began to collect material for his history probably in 197, and began writing probably in 207 (Millar 1964, 28–40). There is no reason to believe that Dio fabricated his statement on the Maeatae. We find traces of the Maeatae just to the north of the Antonine Wall, at Myot Hill north-west of Falkirk and at Dumyat north-east of Stirling, and apparently stretching through into Strathearn (Maxwell 1975). This is important in showing not only that Dio believed that the Antonine Wall was still the northern frontier in the reign of Severus, but also that there was some period in Dio's career in which he had gleaned this information. This period can hardly pre-date AD180, when Dio became a senator, and presumably began to have some access to official information. In the 180s, it would seem, the frontier lay on the Antonine Wall.

If coins of Commodus are rare on the Antonine Wall, inscriptions which name him are totally absent. But then so they are on Hadrian's Wall. (We can leave out of account a small fragment from Netherby³, a dedication which is apparently dated *imp. Comm. cos.*, ie AD 177.) Yet Marcus and his co-emperors are well attested on Hadrian's Wall and in its hinterland: they are named on inscriptions from Great Chesters and Stanwix⁴, and (in the hinterland) from Corbridge, Ribchester and Ilkley (RIB 1149, 589 and 636). What has happened to inscriptions naming Commodus?

The answer lies in the manner in which *damnatio memoriae* affected inscriptions. The last emperor to suffer this, before Commodus, was Domitian. In his case, while sometimes his name was simply erased⁵, often the whole stone seems to have been destroyed: very few inscriptions of Domitian survive. In the case of Commodus, while again his name may be simply erased (eg *ILS* 390, 393–4), we know that inscriptions naming him might be totally destroyed. It is little more than chance that demonstrates this: an inscription survives on the Tripolitanian frontier which records how Severus ordered the restoration of a statue, with a revealing inscription to accompany it (*Ann Ep* 1922, 53):

(Sept. Severus, Caracalla and Geta Caesar, AD 201) . . .

titulum quod divo Commod[o fratr]e suo aerasum (!) fuerat restit[ue]runt per vexil. leg. III Aug. p.v. . . . ['Septimus Severus, with Caracalla and Geta, . . . by the agency of a detachment of the legion III Augusta, restored the inscription to his (ie Severus's) divine brother Commodus, which had been destroyed'.]

In AD 196, when Severus declared himself the son of Marcus Aurelius and the brother of Commodus, he set about attempting to rehabilitate the name of the latter, for example having his name restored on inscriptions (eg *ILS* 402, 405), or seeing to the setting up of new inscriptions (eg *ILS* 403–4). The army of Britain had no cause to like Commodus. The precise nature of the disturbances recorded by Cassius Dio (72, 9, 2–3) and the *Historia Augusta*⁶ is obscure, but it is easy to believe that in Britain inscriptions recording his name were destroyed with great enthusiasm when news was received of his *damnatio memoriae* and the accession of Pertinax. So far we have no evidence of any attempt by Severus to restore the inscriptions of Commodus in Britain.

However, a number of inscriptions found along the line of the Antonine Wall could well have been set up in the last two or three decades of the second century. Thus at Castlecary, the vexillation

of II Augusta recorded in the same inscription with a vexillation of VI Victrix (*RIB* 2146) cannot date to the time of Lollius Urbicus, since all of II Augusta was present then in the Central Lowlands: if the whole legion was present, then a vexillation of that legion could not be there also⁷. There is no known occasion later in the reign of Antoninus Pius which would require the presence of these legionary detachments, and it is reasonable to suggest that they were at Castlecary at a later date. The date proposed for the men of VI Victrix in *RIB* 2148 (c AD 175/190) would fit this very well (Mann 1963, 487–8). The men of II Augusta and VI Victrix may have been building rather than in garrison: the garrison may have been *coh. I fida Vardullorum* (*RIB* 2149).

At Bar Hill similarly, the vexillation of II Augusta, again in the same inscription with a vexillation of XX VV (*RIB* 2171), cannot date to the period of the building of the Wall, and presumably belongs to the late second or early third century: the curling form of the letter G would certainly fit that date (cf Evetts 1949, 162, 171). Again, they were probably merely building at Bar Hill, as indeed the inscription suggests: the garrison was probably *coh. I Hamiorum*⁸.

At Auchendavy, the vexillation of II Augusta (*RIB* 2180) cannot belong to the time of Lollius Urbicus. Here, the vexillation probably was, at some later date, in garrison. This is suggested by the series of dedications by the centurion of II Augusta, M. Cocceius Firmus⁹ and by the tombstone of an ordinary *miles* (*RIB* 2181).

A further point: the inscription recording the construction of the legionary site at Carpow¹⁰ seems to record work done under a sole emperor¹¹. This could, on what coin evidence there is, as easily be a fort built under Commodus as one built under Severus, as John Casey points out to me.

The absence from the Antonine Wall of inscriptions mentioning Commodus, and of dated inscriptions of the reign of Commodus, is no more indicative of a lack of occupation than is the similar absence from Hadrian's Wall. But internally dated inscriptions (and especially important are building inscriptions) do begin again on Hadrian's Wall or in its hinterland in 197, to continue through the reign of Severus in a continuing series down to the mid third century. There are no building inscriptions at all from the Antonine Wall which can be internally dated to the reign of Severus, or later. The contrast can only mean that, from 197 or a little earlier, the frontier line had moved back from the Antonine to the Hadrianic line.

Thus we come to attempt to assign dates to X and Y in our table. There is one perfectly acceptable archaeological event which could be associated with X. This archaeological event is the destruction attested at Halton Chesters and at Corbridge – suggesting an attack southwards down Dere Street. But the date of that event cannot yet be firmly established, unlike the acceptable historical event. This is the destruction recorded by Cassius Dio (72, 8, 1–2), which must have taken place in the early 180s, and the subsequent campaigns of Ulpian Marcellus. The coins of 185–6 record his victory, which we can now reasonably suggest was followed by a new occupation of the Antonine Wall. (It is pertinent to enquire whether some of the 'marching-camps' of southern Scotland are not to be associated with these campaigns.)

Dio is probably incorrect in writing that Commodus *sent* Ulpian Marcellus against the barbarians. More probably, Marcellus was already governor before the death of Marcus, and it was early in Commodus's sole reign that the barbarian attack took place, killing a legate, presumably the commander of VI Victrix¹². Marcellus simply reacted in the fashion required of the governor of a province under attack from outside. In the crisis, Commodus quite probably kept him on for a second term, rather than bring in a new man. Marcellus would have to have the approval of Commodus for a return to the Antonine Wall. It is worth pondering whether Commodus may have felt that annexation of territory was required to justify his taking the title Britannicus.

If X can be dated to c 184, then it follows that the inscriptions at Chesters (*RIB* 1463–4) must date to just before the attack from the north and the campaigns of Marcellus. If the *ala II Asturum*

occupied Chesters in period Ib, then after the return to Hadrian's Wall a few years later, it would hardly be surprising if it returned to Chesters.

After the death of Commodus, the governor of Britain Clodius Albinus seems at first to have allowed himself to be fobbed off by Severus with the title of 'Caesar'. But after the defeat of Pescennius Niger, Albinus must surely have realized the ruthless nature of the victor – and that he was next in line for suppression. Once he began seriously to prepare himself to resist Severus, and make his own bid for the throne, he would need to collect as many troops as he possibly could (as well as recruiting new ones), and this gives a very good reason for a retirement to the Hadrianic line. Such a retirement would be accompanied perforce by agreements with the tribes to the north, the Maeatae and Caledones, agreements in which no doubt these peoples promised not to attack the area occupied by Rome – whether or not in return for money payments or other considerations. Albinus would not be too worried by any possible breaches of those agreements. If a serious invasion took place in his absence, either, if he won the fight with Severus, he would have all the resources of the empire at his command to make good any loss, and take revenge, or, if he lost, it was not a problem he need worry about: it would no longer be his problem. (Nevertheless, it seems quite plausible that he should have ordered the cities of Britain to see to their own defence, at their own expense, of course.)

In fact there is no evidence of any invasion in his absence. Dio does not describe any invasion in 197, nor does anyone else. According to Dio (75, 5, 4), all that happened was that 'the Caledonians did not keep their promises and made ready to assist the Maeatae'. The string of building inscriptions which begins in 197 thus refers to the normal rebuilding necessary when buildings, especially if they have not been continuously occupied, approach 100 years of age. They do not represent reconstruction after enemy attack.

Nevertheless, the Maeatae no doubt took the opportunity, after the departure of Albinus, to consolidate their position, including efforts to gain and keep control of southern Scotland and Northumberland. Did they succeed for a time in subverting the Novantae and the Votadini? Whatever they achieved will have been wiped out by the campaigns of Severus, and the subsequent re-establishment of control over southern Scotland.

We may therefore date Y to c 195, and complete our table accordingly. This chronology has the advantage that it does not violate any of the evidence, least of all that of the literary, epigraphic and numismatic sources. In default of such certainty as can attach to the dating of material from sites being occupied *de novo*, it nevertheless seems to provide a reasonable frame-work against which the archaeological material, more precisely the pottery, can be studied and, at least tentatively, dated¹³.

NOTES

- 1 *Britannia*, 3 (1972), 1–55, especially 22–33. His work renders out of date most of what was written on this subject before 1972.
- 2 *RIB* 1460–1. The former will now read . . . *Anton]ino Aug.[Pio p.p.] cos* . . . ; the second will be similar.
- 3 *RIB* 975. Commodus appears, although not named (hence the survival of the stone), in *RIB* 1329, from Benwell, and presumably also (rather disguised) in *RIB* 946, from Carlisle.
- 4 *RIB* 1737 and 2026: in the latter case again, it is a dedication dated by a consulship – that of Lucius Verus in AD 167.
- 5 As on the Verulamium inscription, *J Roman Stud* 46 (1956), 147.
- 6 Commodus, 6, 2; Pertinax, 3, 5–10.
- 7 See *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 116 (1986), 191–3. We may note that *RIB* 2209, recording work by II Augusta (not by a vexillation), could well belong to the time of Lollius Urbicus.
- 8 *RIB* 2166 (re-read in *Britannia*, 16, 1985, 332), 2167 and 2172.
- 9 *RIB* 2174–7: in 2176 and 2177, the deity is named on the capital of the altar – a late second-or third-century feature.

- 10 *J Roman Stud*, 55 (1965), 223, no 10 and pl XIX=*Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 97 (1963–4), 202–5.
- 11 R P Wright, *Britannia*, 5 (1974), 289–92, correcting J C Mann, *Bonner Jahrbucher*, 170 (1970), 201.
- 12 Presumably it was the legion from York which bore the brunt of the attack, and attempted to stem the tide.
- 13 On the evidence here presented, it seems clear that the Wroxeter gutter deposit, and the Pudding Pan wreck, for which no acceptable dating evidence has ever been provided, may now be tentatively dated to the reign of Severus.

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