

2011

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Parkman Howe

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### Recommended Citation

Howe, Parkman (2011) "The Stones of Rome: A Walk Along Hadrian's Wall," *Appalachia*: Vol. 62: No. 2, Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol62/iss2/11>

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# The Stones of Rome

*A walk along Hadrian's Wall*

**Parkman Howe**



ON MARCH 13, 2010, AT 6 P.M., VOLUNTEERS IGNITED A GAS-powered beacon in Segedunum Roman Fort in Wallsend, near Newcastle in northern England. This set off a “line of light,” a fiery beacon every 250 meters that traveled west along the course of Hadrian’s Wall, the most visible sign of the roughly 400-year Roman occupation of Britain. An hour later and some 84 miles to the west, the 500th beacon was lighted in the deepening darkness at Bowness-on-Solway, on the Cumbrian coast.

Four months later, in late June, our party of four takes a train north from London to celebrate the 1,600th anniversary of the departure of the Romans from Britain with a three-day hike along the central section of Hadrian’s Wall. At Carlisle, in the northwest corner of England, we hire a cab and head for Birdoswald, one of the Roman forts along the wall, twenty miles to the east. Much of the wall has disappeared at the ends where it runs through the major towns of Carlisle in the west and Newcastle in the east. Over the centuries, the stones have been scavenged for farm buildings, houses, and even churches. The best-preserved remains in the center of the wall survive in the windswept uplands known as the Whin Sill.

Our narrow road rises into rolling hills and verdant farmland above the loops of the River Irthing. Suddenly, beside the road, we catch our first sight of the wall. A row of dark stones like articulated dinosaur vertebrae rises out of the green turf. Along the 80 Roman miles of the wall (approximately 73.5 modern miles), the Romans constructed a series of sixteen or so fortifications of which this, originally named *Banna* in Latin, remains one of the best preserved. *Banna* means *spur* or *tongue*, an apt designation for this commanding site, with cliffs to the east and south that overlook the lush valley and serpentine river. The modern name, Birdoswald, derives from a fortified farm on the site in continuous occupation since 1211.

We tour the exposed stone foundations and walls of Roman and medieval construction, then shoulder our day packs for the afternoon hike to Greenhead, five or six miles to the east. Under a gray-white sky we follow the gray stone wall, covered with greenish lichen, here anywhere from six to ten courses of stone (three to five feet in height), and four or five feet in width. It leads straight across a green pasture, in which a scatter of sheep grazes, and disappears into a wooded draw. A worn track indicates the hiking path on the

*Hiking along the wall the Roman Emperor Hadrian ordered built in 122 to protect the empire from the rebelling Picts on the northern border of Britannia, in what is now Scotland.* PARKMAN HOWE

southern side of the wall. Straight ahead to the east an escarpment rises, then drops off precipitously in a wavy line to the north. This, as we later discover, constitutes the Whin Sill, the most formidable defensive section of the wall.

Once beyond the field, we descend into a small, steep valley, cross a shallow watercourse, and pass through meadows, the backyards of houses, and along the edges of pastures. We climb up and down the contours of the land, heading due east all the while. We cross train tracks and switch over to the north side of the wall where we stroll along the bottom of the pronounced ditch paralleling the monument. We view a stone in the wall that announces (translated from the Latin): "From The Fifth Cohort, The Century of Gellius, Philippus (Built This)." We pass stone houses and outbuildings with gray slate roofs and flowering rose bushes in the courtyards. Uncurious sheep eye us from the vivid, close-cropped grass in the wall's shadow. A single pink foxglove bursts from a mortared fissure. We step over fences using a style: wooden or stone steps, sometimes built into the barrier itself, to allow public access through private lands. In the higher elevations, we view upland meadows dotted with dark shade trees. In the bottomlands, the pale straw of wheat (or corn as the English say) colors the fields. As we rise into the exposed swells of pastureland a constant, chill wind reminds us of the sea's proximity. At every turn, the wall accosts us and leads the way across the swells of hills, then dips and twists into the draws of streams that slice the terrain north and south.

We rest in a sheltered nook of the wall, our backs propped against its stones, and read about the wall's history. Emperor from 117 to 138, Hadrian ruled in part by traveling to virtually all corners of his far-flung empire. A rebellion by the Picts in what is now Scotland sometime between 119 and 121 brought Hadrian to the northernmost frontier of the Empire. In 122, he ordered a defensive wall across the northern frontier of Britannia, the northernmost boundary of the empire itself, in what are now the counties of Cumbria in the west and Northumberland in the east. As a result, the three legions at his disposal in Britannia—the second, sixth, and twentieth—began construction of the wall.

The Romans approached the construction with their accustomed precision, diligence, and method. They selected the narrowest and most defensible region of the British mainland across which to build a barrier. On the east, the River Tyne provides a natural deterrent; on the west the River Irthing likewise presents an inherent boundary as it flows into the Solway Firth. Between the two rivers rises a central escarpment of igneous rock, the





*The foundations of Milecastle 39, also called "Castle Nick."* PARKMAN HOWE

result of tectonic plate movement: the sheer cliffs we had seen earlier in the day. Roman engineers used the rivers on either coast as defensive anchors, and followed the natural course of the running line of cliffs and steep slopes that more or less connects the opposing coasts.

Not only elite fighting forces, the legions evolved into master builders, accustomed to constructing roads, bridges, and public projects. They commenced in the east and worked their way west. One construction team laid the foundations and built fortifications at mile intervals, together with smaller turrets in between. A second unit followed, building the wall itself. They fashioned the wall's core from rubble cemented with lime, or sometimes puddled clay. The outer walls consisted of cut stone carefully cemented. One can still see today, at varying intervals on either side of the edifice, the local quarries from which they harvested the wall stone. The legionnaires also cemented the top of the wall to form a walkway; the northern face of the wall featured a six-foot crenellated parapet behind which soldiers could patrol. A defensive V-shaped ditch, separated from the wall by a level space, or berm, nearly 20 feet wide, ran along the length of the wall on the north side. The wall required six years to complete.

As we approach the Greenhead area after an extended hike across treeless uplands, we pass the broken but still looming fourteenth-century walls of Thirlwall Castle, one of the many beneficiaries of Hadrian's Wall stone.

Shortly after the castle, we reach our first B&B, Walltown Lodge, overlooking the pastoral valley of the South Tyne River. Across a single-lane road lies the parking lot of the Roman Army Museum that houses a collection of reproduction Roman weapons and chariots, together with a reconstructed barrack and storeroom. The museum also features *The Eagle's Eye*, a film about a bird's-eye journey from Magna, the name of the fort near the museum, to Vindolanda, a Roman settlement some four miles to the east, which the film recreates through animation. We walk the steep mile down into Greenhead, a small village nestled in a gorge, where we dine on local trout at the Greenhead Hotel. After dinner, we face the mile climb in the chilly, darkening midsummer air back to Walltown Lodge.

After breakfast, we pack a lunch for our second day on the wall. A uniform gray shield of clouds covers the sky. We follow our trail up to Walltown Crag, our first encounter with the dramatic Whin Sill ridge. An upthrust of volcanic dolerite rock that stretches for miles across this region's midsection, the Whin Sill rises from the south, a massive, tilted plateau of turf that terminates abruptly along its northern edge in sheer, angular cliffs of dark, broken rock columns that plunge vertically hundreds of feet in places. Along the top edge of the cliff, Hadrian's Wall marches into the distances east and west. To the south, we view expanses of vast agricultural lands, fields rolling in one or two immense swells to the horizon. To the north, a level plain stretches far away below: a few lush green fields nearby, then patches of dark green forest, a low wave of brown sheep pasture, another green valley beyond, then more grazing land rolling into forest and blue uplands. At our feet, we find scatterings of bluebells, purple vetch, heather, thistle, wild strawberry, gorse, and knapweed. This will be our scenery for the next dozen or so miles.

The wall crests the ridge for hundreds of yards, then drops steeply into a sharp cut, or "nick," only to mount quickly to another crest. Our path rises and falls a dozen times over the course of the day. On one of the crests, we hear the sonic blast of jet engines and locate a pair of aircraft crossing low over the wall half a mile to the west. The dark fighter jets swing wide over the broad fields to the south, turn north, and pass directly overhead within a couple of hundred feet, the shock waves of torn air shattering the muted sigh of wind over rock. A military still patrols the wall.

In the afternoon, we reach the highest point on the wall, Winshields Crag, 345 meters (1,132 feet) above sea level. The view draws the eye north. The Romans made a number of incursions into the highlands, none of lasting consequence. Refusing to meet the Romans on the battlefield, local

tribes conducted guerrilla raids and retreats. In 142, the emperor Antoninus constructed another structure, now referred to as the Antonine Wall, farther north, between the Firth of Forth and the Firth of Clyde. When Antoninus failed to subdue the northern tribes, the new emperor withdrew the legions, around 160, once again to Hadrian's Wall. In approximately 180 the tribes overran the wall, initiating 30 years of warfare. When the emperor Septimius Severus arrived in Britain in 208, he repaired Hadrian's Wall and led various expeditions into modern-day Scotland, penetrating as far north as the Moray Firth. In 210, he managed to negotiate a peace with the Picts, which lasted almost to the end of Roman rule in Britain, in 410. Nevertheless, one source claims that Severus lost as many as 50,000 troops during his campaign. He died of exhaustion at York in 211.

We descend south to the B6318, the modern road that parallels the wall for a number of miles at this point. Our next B&B lies just up the road. In the backyard, we stand in the old Vallum. This monumental earthwork consisted of a 10-foot deep trench, with a flat bottom 10 feet wide, and steep sides sloping upward to form a gap 20 feet across at the top. Thirty-foot wide level berms ran on either side of the trench. Finally, two mounds, each 20 feet wide and 10 feet high, bordered the flanking berms. The entire construct stretched some 120 feet from side to side. The Vallum eventually ran the entire length of the wall itself. Among other concerns, the Romans feared the Celtic Brigantes tribe just to the south. Had the Romans built only the Vallum, it would have represented a significant defensive monument in and of itself.

We take a short bus ride from the nearby visitor's center south to a pleasant knoll above the steep slopes of a wooded stream, with gentle, rolling hills beyond. On one side, behind temporary fencing, a group of archaeologists and volunteers removes wet soil from a ditch. An exhibit informs us that archaeologists expect to be digging here for another 200 years. The fort originally guarded the Stanegate (Old English for "Stone Road"), the first Roman road cutting across this portion of northern England. Hadrian's Wall parallels its path, more or less, just to the north. The site also includes a reconstruction of a wooden wall with a guard tower, as well as a section of wall with a stone turret, such as those once found on Hadrian's Wall. These 12-foot walls make an impressive show in wood and stone. We linger on the turret parapet and gaze across the valley. Although it is late June, we feel the damp in the cold wind.

In 2006, archaeologists found the remains of a girl between the ages of 8 and 10 buried under a barracks floor, her hands tied, almost certainly the

victim of a murder, since bodies were never buried inside Roman settlements. Two other corpses, unearthed in the 1930s, are also thought to have been murdered. Still, the dominant mood of the site remains serene, pastoral. Lush trees rise from the river glen; beyond the small valley, gentle fields ascend to hills crowned with rock outcropping. The Roman name *Vindolanda* derives from the name of the Celtic settlement that predated the Roman fort, meaning white lawns or land. The name speaks to the tranquility of the site.

A path takes us down into the shaded glade and the recreation of a Roman temple. Nearby, a museum displays artifacts recovered at the fort: Roman clothing, shoes, weapons, and the ubiquitous coins. Here, we also read about the famous Vindolanda tablets: thin wafers of wood about the size of our postcards found in a waterlogged dump beside the commander's house, dating from the 90s to the 120s. The Romans built over old sites by layering their building materials. This method, along with clay in the earth and the consequent lack of oxygen, preserved the delicate Latin scripts that list stores, garrison military reports, and private letters of soldiers and their families. Among them researchers found the following invitation to a birthday party, from Claudia Severa to her friend, Sulpicia Lepidina:

On 11 September, sister, for the day of the celebration of my birthday, I give you a warm invitation to make sure that you come to us, to make the day more enjoyable for me by your arrival, if you are present. . . . I shall expect you, sister. Farewell, sister, my dearest soul, as I hope to prosper, and hail.

Several days later, we view the fragile tablet itself, written between 97 and 103, in the British Museum where climate controls prevent deterioration. It represents quite possibly the earliest sample in existence of writing by a woman.

The next day's walk takes us by more sheer cliffs, through pastures of sheep and cattle, across farmyards and fields, past the foundations of milecastles and the ever-present wall. Gradually, the landscape flattens out as we leave the drama of the Whin Sill behind us. Along the open pastureland of one hillside, a modern shepherd in his red ATV herds his flock, giving a lift to his sheepdog across the lush meadow. A helicopter passes overhead. A broad field of bright red poppies, like a lava flow, ignites the distance. We stroll along an avenue of oaks beside a motorway. The dark stones of the wall disappear into the green turf like the ancient scales of a reptile. Outside Chesters Roman Fort at Chollerford, yet another Roman garrison on the wall, we see two signs pointing in opposite directions: "Carlisle B6318" and "Newcastle B63189."

AT FULL STRENGTH, BETWEEN NINE AND TEN THOUSAND TROOPS garrisoned Hadrian's Wall. Thus, it became the most heavily fortified border in the Roman Empire. Still, it could not withstand the vagaries of political, economic, and social fluctuations. The local tribes continued to revolt; the Roman Empire declined and fell. Now, despite two centuries of preservation efforts, wind and rain continue to plow down the faces of its stones.

People generally do not love a wall, as the poet says; they want it down, no matter what it walls in or walls out. Seventeenth-century Dutch settlers put up a stockade wall along the northern boundary of New Amsterdam at the foot of Manhattan Island to fend off English settlers and later Indian warriors. The wall eventually turned into a street. The Berlin Wall, 87 miles long and 12 feet high, lasted a mere 28 years. China's Great Wall remains the world's longest, at more than 5,000 miles. Still, where it does not cross tourist routes, the wall continues to erode and disappear. The world's second-longest wall, the Great Wall of Gorgan in northeastern Iran, failed to stop Alexander the Great, among many others; it too crumbles. Farther back in the mists of time, Troy's walls stood and famously fell. Jericho's walls remain the oldest ever discovered, going all the way back to the ninth millennium. Every one of the world's walls has or will come a-tumblin' down.

Despite their histories, walls continue to be debated and built—in Israel, in North America. Proponents might spend a few days walking along Hadrian's Wall. What wars and barriers could not settle, the diplomacies of populations, commerce, time, and gravity have resolved. Good fences don't really make good neighbors; good neighbors make good neighbors.

Still, uncontested fences, walls, and borders take on an aesthetic beauty unmatched by any other structure. In 1976, Christo constructed his Running Fence in northern California: 40 kilometers of white nylon 18 feet high, rippled and bellied by coastal winds, lit by sunsets and sunrises, sailing across the landscape into the sea. It stood for fourteen days. Or Hadrian's Wall, that dark snake gliding along the rim of the Whin Sill's broken rock and green turf, through the empty Northumbrian landscapes of cloud shadow and light, making its bid to last 2,000 years.

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PARKMAN HOWE is the poetry editor of *Appalachia*.



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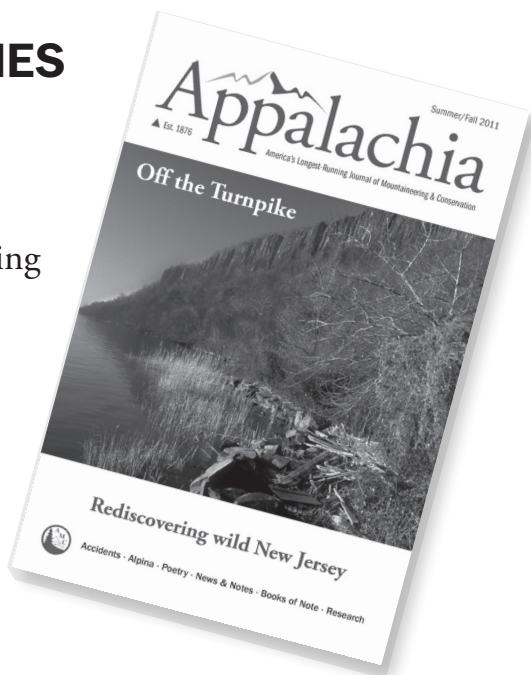
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