Probus talk 13 February 2025

The Antonine Wall – Rome's North West Frontier (140-163AD)

Jim Walker

The talk Jim gave proved most comprehensive, insightful and informative. He covered the history, context, politics, specifications and construction of the wall with very detailed then and now maps, and illustrative pictures of the wall, its forts and mile castles. Jim also painted a picture of the life of the Roman Legionaries (rectangular shield) and non-Roman Auxiliaries (oval shield) that were used to construct and man the wall.

Having described the Roman invasion and conquering of Britain through various campaigns, Jim mentioned the East Coast campaign to conquer Northern Scotland. It went as far as Aberdeen. The battle of Mons Grapius AD 83 in the mountains East of Aberdeen resulted in a massive Roman victory for Gnaeus Julius Agricola over the Caledonii with the remnants of the Caledonian tribes retreating back into the mountains. The Romans saw no point in chasing tribes engaged in guerrilla warfare through the mountains and valleys of Central, Eastern and Western Scotland for little economic gain, so eventually the Antonine Wall was built about 20 years after Hadrian's Wall (which ran between Carlisle and Newcastle) to mark the furthest North West Border of the Roman Empire. The wall was named after Antoninus Pius the new Roman Emperor after Hadrian, who was looking to enhance his prestige by conquest. The wall was approximately 40 Roman Miles long (37 Imperial miles today). It ran from the Old Kilpatrick on the Firth of Clyde to Bo'ness on the Firth of Forth. It took about 2 years to build and was manned, mostly by Auxiliaries, for the 25 years it was active.

Deep pits with wooden stakes covered in excrement were constructed to the north of the outer wall. A ditch 40ft wide and 20ft deep followed its length. A palisade (wooden front) and layers of turf on solid rock foundations made up the wall itself. The wall was 10ft high, and 16ft wide to accommodate a walkway for troops to rapidly reinforce each other. Behind the wall a Roman road ran its length to facilitate speed of reaction for emergencies and for bringing in food and supplies.
Along the length of the wall there were 16 forts with small mile fortlets intertwined along its length. These forts had barracks, an infirmary, HQ and bath house/cafeteria. Several larger forts existed and had over 500 legionaries. Some fort buildings even had glass windows and central heating. A hypocaust system with underfloor hot air from West facing fires. Summerston, Bearsden Bathhouse, Boclair, Kinell, Cawder, Balmuildy, Croy Hill, Castlecarry, Rough Castle Fort/Watling Lodge Falkirk, Bonnybridge, Seabegs are all names of forts or archaeological areas of interest today. Initially 3 legions including the 2nd, 6th and 10th, each of about 5,000 men, helped construct the wall. There are distance stones sculptures unique to the Antonine Wall

which were embedded in the wall to mark the lengths built by each legion. They were brightly painted unlike their present bare appearance. Much of the archaeology associated with the wall can be found in Glasgow University Hunterian Museum and Callendar House Falkirk.

The wall was used primarily for defence as fewer soldiers were required to man it. It was also used to control trade and provide taxes, gathered by the Procurator, from the Caledonian tribes north of the wall and tribes south of it. Some fierce localised raiding warfare took place during the duration of the wall being manned. Smoke, fire and glass were used to communicate and signal along with horse riders. Main Roman Depots and Forts at Carlisle and Corbridge on Hadrian's Wall were used to reinforce the Antonine Wall along the extensive Roman roads that had been built throughout England, Wales and Scotland. Chester and York were also large garrison depots.

Roman soldiers were primarily from Italy and had Roman Citizenship. Roman Auxiliaries did, on the whole not have Roman Citizenship. They came from all corners of the Roman Empire to Scotland. The Empire encompassed the entire Mediterranean from Spain and modern day Morocco in the West through to Iraq and Persia in the East. Most were bi-lingual and could speak sufficient Latin to understand their Roman officers. Evidence was found that many had been recruited from conquered tribes in Belgium, Holland, France, Spain and even Syria and Bulgaria. Syria supplied archers and a garrison commanding officer who had been stationed in North Africa even brought his African wife with him!

Native settlements sprung up for trading alongside the major forts. Livestock such as sheep, goats and chickens along with cereal such as oats and barley and, of course, beer were traded. Although soldiers were not allowed to marry, relationships inevitably sprung up which the garrison commanding officers turned a blind eye too. Roman Centurions, were not, contrary to what is often thought, in charge of 100 men. A century was 80 men. He had an Optio as his deputy. Legionaries were paid three times a year. A 1/3 of their salary went towards their pension and lump sum retirement pay after their 25 years of service.

Marcus Aurelius, the next Emperor after Antoninus, in 161AD, established that the economic cost of the Antonine Wall exceeded the benefit. The Legions subsequently withdrew back to Hadrian's Wall. Even so the Romans still actively campaigned and fought in Scotland for many decades. Septimus Severus arrived in Scotland in 208AD and led a successful subjugation of the Maeatae tribes and Caledonii tribes.
Jim took many questions from his Probus of Allander colleagues which illustrated how captivated we all were with his delivery and the subject. A wonderful talk!

David Boot