

CHARLOTTE HIGGINS ON CULTURE BLOG



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The Antonine Wall sculptures at the Hunterian Museum: no gimmicks, just the living stone

What a relief to see the Hunterian Museum displaying its Antonine Wall sculptures so simply

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I really enjoyed examining the sculptures from the Roman empire's most northerly frontier last week, for a [news piece published earlier this week](#). These remnants of the [Antonine Wall](#) have been given a [beautiful new gallery](#) in the Hunterian, [Glasgow](#), an apse-like niche in Gilbert Scott's soaring, cathedral-like museum building, which is now open to the public again after two years' refurbishment.

And what was so great about it was that it was entirely unapologetic. There were no interactive displays imagining entirely spurious lives for the men and women (OK, woman) commemorated on these stones; no film projections depicting legionaries marching through the Scottish lowlands. Instead, the sculptures, most of which are elaborately carved "distance slabs" (recording such-and-such a number of feet of wall built by such-and-such a chunk of the army) are simply allowed to be themselves: objects of great age and gravity; things of beauty and importance. They are uplit rather handsomely and, as the lovely natural light fades, they look more and more dramatic; they are intensely evocative.

Writing a book about [Roman Britain](#), I've seen so many museum displays where the museum designers and marketing departments have clearly taken fright at the idea of visitors being confronted with something so stark as a chunk of stone with some Latin on it, and have decided to cheer the experience up with screens and audio recordings and God knows what else. I always gripe about this and am always being told that the museum's not just for me, but must cater to different audiences, and that these cold slabs are offputting to children and indeed absolutely inaccessible to most. Maybe that's so (although I'm inclined to think that's a slightly patronising view), and of course I'm projecting my own version of the romance of antiquity on these shards of another time. Still,

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thank Heaven there are still one or two museums where the curators have some confidence in the power of the objects to impress or intrigue on something approaching their own terms.

I walked the line of the Antonine Wall last year and, though most of it is lost to trunk roads, the Forth-Clyde canal and suburban sprawl, there are sections of it (notably Bar Hill and Rough Castle) that are dramatic and impressive. It's absolutely worth discovering this relatively little-known patch of Britain's Roman past, and the Hunterian's new display is the best place of all to start.

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