



The Antonine Wall: Rome's Final Frontier, Hunterian Museum, University of Glasgow

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Peter Lewis is enlightened by his visit to a refreshed Hunterian Museum and its new Roman gallery

"Every child in Britain," insists British Museum director Neil MacGregor, "learns about Hadrian's Wall."

Certainly, as an infant in east London, I was taught that this famous barrier was the northern boundary of the Roman empire, built solely to keep England safe from the barbarian Picts and Scots.

Only in adulthood did I discover the more northerly Antonine Wall, built between the firths of Forth and Clyde, which between the 140s and 160s AD marked the northernmost part of the empire.

Now, a new exhibition in Glasgow tells all about what the curators of the Hunterian Museum call, with some authority, Rome's Final Frontier. These displays are part of a two-year redevelopment of the museum, which reopened in September.

It would be difficult to find two more different characters than Emperor Hadrian and his nominated successor Antoninus Pius. Hadrian was an experienced soldier who spent the greater part of his reign visiting and stabilising the empire.

One of his first decisions was to give up most of the territories recently conquered by Trajan. He withdrew the Roman army from Mesopotamia, modern day-Iraq, though he later fought campaigns to keep control in the Balkans, Caucasus, Judea and Palestine, which all remain conflict zones today.

Antoninus had no such military pretensions. Throughout the 23 years of his reign he never left Italy. It has been said that he had never seen, let alone commanded, a Roman army.

Why then, early in his reign, did Antoninus instruct Quintus Lollius Urbicus, the governor of Roman Britain, to invade southern Scotland and push the imperial border northwards?

There is no evidence that the indigenous tribes were especially rebellious. The reason lay in Rome itself. Beset by critics at home, Antoninus needed a military victory. The campaign was, insists David Gaimster, the director of the Hunterian, "an act of propaganda... and its success secured his position."

Enlightening

After a two-year refurbishment the museum has opened this splendid new gallery, bringing together its unparalleled collections, some of which date back to its foundation in 1807.

When George Gilbert Scott designed the new Hunterian building in 1870 he created "A Cathedral to Knowledge", spectacularly awe-

inspiring gothic revival architecture that could so easily overwhelm the exhibitions themselves. But the very reverse occurs.

The visitor takes a sharp intake of breath at the splendour of the setting but is then drawn into what is a consummately well-designed and intelligent exposition, which uses the space to great effect.

The gallery explores four themes: the building of the wall and its impact on the landscape; the role of the Roman army and military lifestyle; the cultural interaction between invaders and the indigenous population; and the abandonment of the wall and its rediscovery over the past three centuries until its recognition as a World Heritage Site in 2008.

The intertwining narratives are told by the artefacts themselves, which are beautifully lit and intelligently labelled. The curators, conscious of their teaching role in the university, have eschewed the interpretive gimmicks that, according to individual predilections, either heighten or vulgarise modern museum displays.

There are no buttons to push, no interactive displays or videos of role playing legionaries engaging with ill-clad barbarians.

There were children actively engaged in the gallery on the day I visited. They were not in replica costume or wearing face paint. They had not been patronised as "kids".

They and the adults present were enthralled with the material on display. It takes an act of curatorial courage to confront visitors with ancient statuary and chunks of stone, with or without Latin inscriptions. But in this instance, the policy of artefacts first and artifice nowhere works a treat.

I'm often aware as I visit 21st-century museums and galleries that the designers are torn between seeking to educate and entertain visitors. There is an older and a better way, and the Hunterian has rediscovered this – it's the other e-word, enlighten.

From the artefacts on display I was made aware that the soldiery themselves enjoyed "as sophisticated a Mediterranean lifestyle as legionaries anywhere else in the empire". Their diet included figs, dates and wine.

Some elements of the indigenous population were enjoying imported prestige goods, carved gems, glassware and bronze mirrors, long before their settlements were attacked.

That military offensive was short and tense. A huge stone-shot used in the destruction of Leckie bears a cracking pattern that suggests it was superheated before despatch.

Roman spin

Distance slabs, carvings produced by the legions commemorating their allocated sections of the wall, are often highly illustrative.

The museum has brought together for the first time the 19 surviving stones – 16 originals, plus casts of two held in other Scottish museums and the one destroyed in the great fire of Chicago of 1896. Their inscriptions record a disingenuous veneration of the military prowess of Antoninus as father of his country.

The carved images are richer and more elaborate than their equivalents on Hadrian's Wall. On one the inscription is uplifted by two winged figures of Victory.

To their left stands an armoured figure of Mars. To the right is a female figure of Imperial Valour holding a legionary standard and a sheathed sword.

On others, subservient speared or bound naked barbarians endure their fates. These distance slabs did not face north to frighten the enemy, but formed a south-facing triumphal arc confirming to the Roman invaders the success and status of their mission.

The apse-like window space of the gallery features eclectic displays of altars to assorted deities, and some secular activities, including a delicately carved fountain head with a bearded face.

I particularly enjoyed one humble label that reads: "This scene may represent a medical procedure." Others think that it is probably rude. Having studied the exhibit with care, I think that the others are probably correct.

The final part of this gallery informs us that the life of the Antonine Wall ended in less than a generation. With the death of Antoninus and the accession of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, came the inevitable defence review.

Trouble in the empire meant that the legions were moved and the frontier reverted to Hadrian's Wall.

There is so much to admire in this courageous and thought-provoking gallery at the Hunterian. It is well worth beating a path to Glasgow to visit it.

Peter Lewis is a writer and a past director of Beamish

Project data

- Cost £105,000
 - Main funders Museums Galleries Scotland; University of Glasgow Chancellor's Fund
 - Exhibition design Stephen Perry (The Hunterian)
 - Contractors Richard West (Lightly West); Service Graphics; Eastbank Glass
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