

# GENIUS LOCI

# LASZLOVSZKY 60

edited by  
Dóra Mérai  
and

Ágnes Drosztnér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,  
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,  
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



ARCHAEOLINGUA

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# Two Roman Frontiers and their Sub-Roman Afterlife

IAN WOOD\*

My first meeting with Jóska was probably at the site of Visegrád when he was excavating there in the 1990s. The view from the great citadel provides an extraordinary panorama of what was once a section of the Roman *limes*. *Aquincum*, which I have also visited with Jóska as a guide, gives another, much gentler, impression of the frontier zone as a Roman city fronting onto a major line of riverine communication. *Aquincum*, with its houses, temples, and *collegia*, including that of the textile-dealers with their splendid organ, contrasts markedly with the image of the Roman frontier conjured up for most historians of Roman Britain: the rugged landscape of Hadrian's Wall. The contrast is interesting and will bear some thought.

Comparison between the Rhine-Danube *limes* and Hadrian's Wall is not made all that often. Of course, the continental frontier is much longer and more varied than the insular one. Yet there are comparisons to be drawn between the fortifications of the Rhineland, the Danube on the one hand and Northumbria on the other, and there are broader parallels to be made between the Alamannic area of the *Agri Decumates* and North Britain.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, there are huge differences: the Tyne and Irthing rivers are streams by comparison with the Rhine and Danube, while no Roman city north of York, which lies a hundred kilometres south of the Wall, can compare with *Aquincum* or the great cities of the Rhineland.

These two distinctions, the presence and absence of great rivers and great cities, are worth pondering. Of course the great Roman cities of the Rhine and the Danube were part of the frontier defensive system, although this is often less apparent from the cities themselves than from the bridgeheads set up on the barbarian side of the river, as for instance those of *Trans Aquincum*

and *Contra Aquincum*.<sup>2</sup> But they were not just part of a network of defense: they also exploited the riverine communications and the trade that they carried. This is illustrated most clearly by the ship finds at Mainz, as well as carved representations of boats and their cargoes found at Roman sites in the Rhineland.

There was certainly communication between the mouth of the Tyne in the east and the Solway in the west. It is best evidenced in the early Anglo-Saxon period, when we know of contacts between Ireland, Jarrow, and Lindisfarne. In the Roman period that communication, however, seems to have been primarily military. The Stanegate, which lay to the south of the Wall, was controlled by a line of fortresses, and alongside the Wall itself there was a military road.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that where the Wall meets the Solway in the west there is a Roman town. Carlisle seems to have been a *civitas* capital.<sup>4</sup> It was, in fact, made up of two centers: the fort and dependent town of *Luguvalium* situated on the south bank of the Esk River, and the Wall fort on the opposite bank of the river, which seems to have been known both as *Petrianis* and as *Uxelodunum* – the multiple centers compare nicely with *Aquincum*. At the eastern end of the Wall there was a cluster of major forts, above all *Arbeia* on the headland of South Shields, where the Tyne meets the North Sea, and *Segedunum*, or Wall's End.<sup>5</sup> Just to the west of *Arbeia*, and almost directly across the Tyne from *Segedunum*, lay the great tidal harbor of Jarrow Slake.<sup>6</sup> It was perhaps the largest and safest tidal harbor in the Roman north, and it survived to be a port of great importance for the Northumbrian kings, known as the *Portus Ecgfridi*, the harbor of King Ecgfrith. In the Roman period it seems to have been first and foremost a military port. Certainly there is no indication that it provisioned a major civilian town. The British *limes* centered on Hadrian's Wall, in other words, was a more exclusively military

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► Fig. 1. Birdoswald Roman Fort. The posts mark the position of the timbers of the post-Roman buildings that replaced the stone granaries (photo: I. Wood)

zone than were those sections of the Rhine and Danube frontiers which boasted major cities. There were, of course, less urbanized sections of the continental frontiers, like that which passed through the *Agri Decumates*, where the military was more dominant.

As significant as the distinctions between the British and Pannonian frontiers in the central period of the Roman Empire are their differing fates. *Aquincum* declined considerably as a civilian center in the course of the third and fourth centuries, although there is some evidence of poor civilians joining *foederati* in the fortified centers. In the late fifth and early sixth centuries, the *Suevi* occupied the military amphitheater at *Aquincum* and there is some evidence for Langobard occupation of forts before 568.<sup>7</sup> Like the Huns before them, however, the Avars who took over control of Pannonia incorporated it into a zone that included both sides of the Danube and insofar as there was any survival from the Roman past it was further to the west at Keszthely. The old *limes* had no afterlife.

The same does not appear to have been true in Britain. Certainly Hadrian's Wall ceased to be a frontier, but it had only ever been one element in a wide frontier zone. There had been a system of Roman forts to the north of the Wall, some of

them, most notably those at Bewcastle and High Rochester, of considerable significance.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the Romans also felt that the Wall was under threat from British tribes to the south. For this reason it was protected by a *Vallum*.<sup>9</sup> We should, therefore, think of the British *limes* in the north as a zone some fifty or more kilometers broad.

Although the Wall zone ceased to be a frontier, there is increasing evidence for some sort of continued occupation in some of its forts after the early years of the fifth century. The traditional view that the Roman army was withdrawn from Britain after 406 does not bear scrutiny, even if Constantine III took the last of the mobile *comitatenses* with him when he made a bid to take over the Western Empire. The *limitanei*, or most of them, seem to have remained in situ. This may be unlike what happened in *Noricum*, where we hear of the withdrawal of frontier troops in the days of Odovacer.<sup>10</sup> A good percentage of the forts on Hadrian's Wall that have been excavated using modern techniques saw continuing occupation,<sup>11</sup> and in the case of Birdoswald, large scale rebuilding in timber (Fig. 1 and 2).<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, such rebuilding would not have been noticed by archaeologists digging the Wall forts before the closing decades of the twentieth century.





► Fig. 2. Birdoswald Roman Fort (photo: I. Wood)

There is scarcely any written evidence for the Wall zone in the fifth and sixth centuries. At the start of that period, we can be sure that the Roman command was still in existence: by 600, there was a new political unit at the western end known as Rheged, a British kingdom which may have been based in Carlisle and which seems to have dominated the Solway as well as the territory to the south.<sup>13</sup> At the eastern end of the Wall, there was the kingdom of the *Bernicii* – a Celtic term, which may mean “the piercers of battle lines,” but is usually held to mean “the people of the high passes.”<sup>14</sup> This was one of the major components of the kingdom of Northumbria which emerged in the course of the next decades.

There is an assumption that the kingdom of the *Bernicii* was the creation of incoming Anglo-Saxons, although there is no origin legend that talks of the arrival of Germanic peoples into the far north of Roman Britain—only a strange story about a figure called Ida establishing himself at Bamburgh, but his origins are not specified.<sup>15</sup> Nor is there much archaeological evidence for significant immigration into the lands north of the Tees River. Certainly the *Bernicii*, and subsequently the Northumbrians, would have seen themselves as Anglian or Saxon by the beginning

of the eighth century. It may be, however, that this was an ideological construct, although there would have been some basis for claiming to be of Germanic extraction, since many of the *limitanei* stationed along the Wall had originally been brought across from the Lower Rhineland.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, there is a strong case for thinking that the military zone of Hadrian’s Wall developed into the core of two sub-Roman political units: one claiming to be British, and probably centered on Carlisle, and the other claiming to be Anglian or Saxon, probably centered on the lower Tyne, with perhaps its chief center at the old Roman fort of *Arbeia*, which seems to have been a royal residence known as *Urfa*, a name derived from the Roman original.<sup>17</sup> Presumably these two kingdoms were the creation of warlords who were the descendants of military commanders of the Wall forts, who had steadily eliminated their neighbors and rivals.

Whereas *Aquincum* vanished almost without trace, the forts of Hadrian’s Wall seem to have been transformed into providing the core of an early medieval kingdom. The great civilian city on the Danube vanished, while the military zone of Hadrian’s Wall grew into something that would survive into the Middle Ages.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ian Wood, "Concluding Remarks: Some Comparative Observations," in *Antike im Mittelalter – Fortleben, Nachwirken, Wahrnehmung*, ed. S. Brather, H. U. Nuber, H. Steuer, and Thomas Zotz (Stuttgart: Thorbecke, 2014), 443–448.
- <sup>2</sup> See the maps in Paula Zsidi, "Begegnung mit der Antiken Welt. Nachleben und Neuleben auf den Ruinen von Aquincum," in *Archaeological Studies in Honour of Eva Garam*, ed. Tivadar Vida (Budapest: ELTE, 2012), 15–23. For recent studies of the Rhine-Danube limes see Michaela Konrad and Christian Witschel, *Römische Legionslager in den Rhein und Donauprovinzen – Nuclei spätantik-frühmittelalterlichen Lebens* (Munich: Beck, 2011).
- <sup>3</sup> David Breeze and Brian Dobson, *Hadrian's Wall* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 20–27.
- <sup>4</sup> Mike McCarthy, *Roman Carlisle and the Lands of the Solway* (Stroud: Tempus, 2002), 67–92.
- <sup>5</sup> Paul Bidwell and Stephen Speak, *Excavations at South Shields Roman Fort*, vol. 1 (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Newcastle Society of Antiquaries, 1994).
- <sup>6</sup> Ian Wood, *The Origins of Jarrow: The Monastery, the Slake and Ecgfrith's Minster* (Jarrow: Bede's World, 2008), 18–28.
- <sup>7</sup> Tivadar Vida, "Late Roman Territorial Organisation and the Settlement of the Barbarian Gentes in Pannonia," *Hortus Artium Medievalium* 13, no. 2 (2007): 319–331; Idem, "Die Zeit zwischen dem 4. und dem 6. Jahrhundert im mittleren Donauraum aus dem archäologischer Sicht," in *Römische Legionslager in den Rhein und Donauprovinzen*, ed. M. Konrad and C. Witschel (Munich: Verl. Der Bayer. Akad. der Wiss., 2011): 615–648.
- <sup>8</sup> Guy de la Bédoyère, *Hadrian's Wall: History and Guide* (Stroud: Tempus, 1998), 121–125.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 18–19.
- <sup>10</sup> Edward Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians: The Decline of the Western Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 121–122.
- <sup>11</sup> Ken Dark, "A Roman Re-Defence of Hadrian's Wall?," *Britannia* 23 (1992): 11–20.
- <sup>12</sup> Tony Wilmott, *Birdoswald Roman Fort: 1800 Years on Hadrian's Wall* (Stroud: Tempus, 2001), 113–126.
- <sup>13</sup> McCarthy, *Roman Carlisle*, 131–154.
- <sup>14</sup> Andrew Breeze, "The Name of Bernicia," *The Antiquaries Journal* 89 (2009): 73–79.
- <sup>15</sup> Ian Wood, "The Roman Origins of the Northumbrian Kingdom," in *Italy and Medieval Europe, Papers for Chris Wickham*, eds. Ross Balzaretti, Julia Barrow and Patricia Skinner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 39–40.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 42–43.
- <sup>17</sup> Bidwell and Speak, *Excavations at South Shields Roman Fort*, vol. 1, 42; Wood, *The Origins of Jarrow*, 22–23.