Hadrian's Wall: Milecastles, Turrets and the Curtain

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Hadrian's Wall:
Milecastles, Turrets and the Curtain

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Front cover: The inner west pier and voussoirs of the north gate at Milecastle 37 (photo: Derek A. Welsby). Plan of Milecastle 37, Housesteads overlain by a 10*pm* grid (this vol., 24, fig. 14).

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Dedication

To the memory of our good friends

and esteemed colleagues

Julian Bennett (1949 – 2025)

Paul Bidwell (1949 – 2022)

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Laying out the ground plans of turrets and milecastles on Hadrian's Wall

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Introduction

Derek A. Welsby and Nick Hodgson

The four papers contained in this slim volume look in detail at a number of aspects of the layout, design and superstructural appearance of the milecastles, turrets and curtain of Hadrian's Wall between the Tyne and Solway in Britain.

The first paper is probably the least contentious as it is based entirely on the observed and recorded evidence revealed through excavation since the 19th century at milecastles and turrets. The raw data, however, is not free of problems. The quality of recording has varied and occasionally leaves much to be desired. Also it is often unclear exactly what was being measured or what was being planned by excavators: the foundations, footings or superstructure below or above offsets. Where preservation is poor the final thickness of the walls carried up to first-floor level cannot be ascertained. All these factors impact on a discussion of the metrology – the systems of measurement and proportion discerned in this study as underlying the building plans. A further problem was caused by the Romans themselves with their sometimes shoddy building practices which have resulted in variations in plan dimensions and in wall thicknesses which may not reflect the original specifications.

The other three papers, whilst grounded in the observed structural evidence, inevitably involve a greater amount of conjecture. The absence of superstructures collapsed in their entirety, comparable to the fort walls at Wörth, means that certainty in the form of the superstructure once supported on the surviving elevation of the Wall-curtain and over the milecastle gates is unobtainable.

The nature of the upper parts of the curtain has been discussed many times before, often at great length and over many decades, most recently in *Archaeologia Aeliana* for 2024. In light of the relatively poor preservation of the curtain of Hadrian's Wall, parallels from elsewhere in the Empire must be utilised to provide plausible designs for the wall top – i.e. solutions grounded within the Romans' lived experience. The second and third papers take this approach when considering the nature of the curtain's upper parts. Modern concepts of, for example, how wide a parapet walk needs to be to be functional, and the need for a rear parapet, must be discarded when faced with examples constructed and surviving within the frontiers of the Roman Empire at the time that Hadrian's frontier was conceived. Particular importance is attached to the chamfered slabs from a string course found in profusion along the curtain, which on analogy with military defences elsewhere can be shown to have a specific relevance to this discussion.

The final paper looks at the evidence for towers over milecastle gateways. These have usually been assumed to exist over one or both gates but this assumption has never been critically assessed in the light of the structural evidence and a consideration of the standard practices exhibited by the Roman military when constructing elements of their fortifications.

The paper by the late Paul Bidwell on the question of whether there was a wall-walk was originally published by the Arbeia Society in 2008 in a collection of papers, *Understanding Hadrian's Wall*, arising from a conference held two years earlier. This volume never had a wide circulation and is unavailable online and difficult to obtain, even in libraries, hence the decision to re-publish what was a contribution of fundamental importance to the debate on the appearance of Hadrian's Wall. It is hoped that its republication here, alongside the paper on the chamfered string course by Nick Hodgson, will serve to

provide a sounder, evidence-based, assessment of the nature of the curtain superstructure than that made in some recent discussions. The nature of the top of the curtain and of the superstructure over milecastle gateways are not simply structural details of merely academic interest. Both have a profound impact on how we interpret the function of the linear barrier both in its initial conception but also into the second half of the 2nd century AD when the curtain and the milecastles towards the western end of the Wall were rebuilt in stone to basically the same specification as the original early Hadrianic construction.

In Bidwell's article the method of citation for bibliographic references has been left as in the original. Apart from the need for reformatting to fit the dimensions of the current publication the article has been left exactly as Paul wrote it apart from the replacement of Figures 1, 4 and 5 with versions in colour. Derek Welsby has provided the colour versions of Figures 4 & 5 and we are grateful to Simon Esmonde Cleary for kindly providing a colour version of Figure 1. Some commentary on a few points that require correction or modification in the light of research since 2008 can be found in Hodgson's paper. The editors are grateful to the Arbeia Society for permission to re-publish the paper.

Finally, it should be noted that while the editors broadly agree on most of the issues surrounding the design and appearance of the Wall, their contributions represent their individual interpretations of the evidence and their appearance together in this volume does not necessarily denote agreement with every single point in the other's work.

The editors are grateful to Dr Patricia Spencer for copy editing the volume. Any remaining errors are the responsibility of the individual authors.