

Why and how was  
hadrian's wall  
constructed and how  
effectively did it serve  
to it...



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The Roman Empire faced several problems with its frontiers in different parts of the world.

Some of them were due to the lack of natural boundaries other due to threats from 'barbaric' tribes. However it is Britain which possesses the remains of the European most famous solution of this problem, Hadrian's Wall.

Stephen Johnson points out that it is ironic that " Britain, which must be regarded as something of an offshoot of the main European Roman world, should contain one of the today's best known Roman frontiers-Hadrian's Wall". 1The conquest of the British Isles in 55 and 54 B. C.

Julius Caesar invaded Britain and defeated the tribe Catevellauni of Kent. Like most of the Western Europe at the time, Britain was populated by Celtic tribes, who were only very loosely united. However circumstances, especially the political situation in Gaul, forced Caesar to withdraw from Britain before making any alliances or treaties. It was not till nearly a century later that a new invasion took place. In 43 AD the Roman Emperor Claudius sent Aulus Plautius with 4 legions (II Augusta, IX Hispania, XIV Gemina and XX Valeria); in total about 40, 000 men, to conquer Britain once again.

For many years after the second invasion the Romans slowly advanced to the West and north, encountering considerable resistance however, by 79 AD most of what is today England and Wales was under Roman control. It was Emperor Vespasian, who decided that Scotland should be also incorporated into the Roman Empire. Gnaeus Iulius Agricola, governor of Britain, was trusted with this task. By 81 AD Agricola succeeded in the conquest of Selgovae, Novatae and Votadini tribes. However it was the Caledonia tribe

who resisted the Roman conquest the most. Agricola eventually met Calgacus, the leader of the Caledonians, in the battle of Mons Graupius at 84 AD and defeated him.

In spite of his victories, it proved very hard for Agricola to begin Romanization of the new territory. In order to consolidate this success, Agricola and his successors built Stanegate, a Roman road connecting river crossings in Carlisle and Corbridge, defended by series of numeri (watch-towers), small forts and later 'half-day' forts were added. The Stanegate system was a predecessor to Hadrian's Wall. Why was the Hadrian's wall built? The Roman Empire reached its peak in size under Hadrian's predecessor, emperor Trajan. Trajan was a warlike emperor, who spent most of his reign campaigning around the Empire. Under his reign the area directly controlled by Rome stretched some 3000 by 1750 miles.

However by the time of Hadrian's succession in 117 AD, the Roman Empire found itself threatened from many enemies. Rebellions arose all around the Empire in Egypt, Libya, Palestine and even "the Britons could not be kept under control" 2, referring to a short uprising against the Roman supremacy in Britain approximately between 119 and 121 AD, which involved the Brigantes tribe of northern England and the Selgovae and Novantae tribes of southern Scotland, sometimes unanimously referred to as the Picts. Even Hadrian himself was under a certain political pressure as he wasn't Trajan's son, but was adopted by him shortly before his death in 117 AD. Hadrian's aims weren't those of conquest but those of stabilization on the Empire.

As an experienced commander who served on the frontiers of the Empire in the east as a junior officer, Hadrian understood the importance of stabilizing the situation on the frontiers. Most of the frontiers of the Roman Empire were natural. It was rivers Rhine and Danube in the west and east respectively, deserts in North Africa, and in those places with no natural boundaries, artificial were erected, such as Raetian palisade in Germany between Rhine and Danube. The later case was similar to situation in Scotland. Each frontier area faced a different problem and needed a different approach. It seems that conquest of Scotland was given up after 87 AD when the VI Flavia legion was transferred to Danube.

However this raised the problem that a frontier had to be found within, rather than at the end of the Island. This was a significant shift in Roman policy, as it was not common for Roman Emperors to set limits to their empire. Frontier purpose is one of the many functions and purposes of Hadrian's Wall. It marked a fixed frontier of the Roman province of Britain as it lacked any natural frontier between Scotland and England. There had been many attempts to conquer Scotland before Hadrian's reign, and after too, nevertheless none of these were successful. Hadrian decided not to conquer Caledonia, southern Scotland, and rather consolidate the area which already had been conquered, marked by the Wall.

As Hadrian's biographer Aelius Spartianus stated that the Wall was to "separate Romans from barbarians" <sup>3</sup>, meaning that the Wall was supposed to keep people within the area, supported by the fact that cities such as Aldborough were founded in the area protected by the Wall. Walls such as Hadrian Wall are also psychologically comforting for both the army and the <https://assignbuster.com/why-and-how-was-hadrians-wall-constructed-and-how-effectively-did-it-serve-to-its-purpose/>

civil population. There is no doubt that the Wall served to keep people in as well as out of the consolidated area. The Hadrian's Wall was supposed to prevent the usual raids of the Selgovae tribe into the "Romanitas" 4-Romanized territories. This military function was strengthened by several forts along the Wall, milecastles and turrets garrisoned with soldiers, and series of ditches in front of and in the back of the Wall. The defence role of the Wall was reinforced on the Cumberland (west) coast by an extension of the Wall, so all fords across the coastal wetlands lie beyond the Wall and thus ensure that no unexpected invasion arrived on the coast.

However the Wall itself was never meant to be used as a fighting platform and it is argued by some that the Wall didn't even have patrol walk along the top. Not only was the Wall supposed to keep people in or out but also apart. It was the tribes Selgovae, Novatae and Brigantes that caused most of the troubles in Northern England and Scotland. Brigantes could have relatively easily settled down and accepted the Roman administrative system had they been separated from other tribes. Instead in coalition with other tribes such as Selgovae, the Brigantes caused several rebellions such as the rebellion led by Venutius, leader of Brigantes, in 69AD. However this separation of tribes wasn't of a full scale but rather local.

The Romans didn't intend to completely isolate the area to the north of the Wall but toHow was The Wall constructed? Hadrian decided to construct the wall after his visit of Britain 122 AD and it was begun in the same year. We do not know the exact date of the completion of the Wall, though most of the work was completed in 132 AD, but it is certain it was finished before

Hadrian's death in 138. a) Position of the WallThe Hadrian's Wall began at <https://assignbuster.com/why-and-how-was-hadrians-wall-constructed-and-how-effectively-did-it-serve-to-its-purpose/>

the Pons Aelius (modern Newcastle) where a new bridge named after the emperor had just been built across the Tyne. From there it follows a low ridge north of the river to Chester, where it crosses the Northern Tyne, and then along the line of the Whin Sill.

In general it keeps to the high ground and, after crossing the Irthing at Castlesteads, runs parallel to the north bank of the river all the way to Stanwix (Carlisle). From the River Eden, it follows the south shore of the Solway Firth for 14 miles, ending at the Irish Sea near Bowness. The total distance of the original plan was 111 kilometres or some 76 Roman miles. There is no doubt Hadrian's Wall was planned with the already existing Stanegate system in mind. It was built a mile or so in advance of the system and forts on it. Also the landscape of the Northern England was used as an advantage in the planning of the Wall.

Where it conditions allows the Wall follows natural crags and ditches, such as a section of the Wall follows Whin Sill (on the photograph above), a line of north facing crags. b) The Wall In total the Wall is 76 Roman miles long, just over 70 British miles. It originally consisted of 2 parts, one built of stone one of turf. The Stone part of the Wall run for 45 Roman miles from the east coast to the crossing of the river Irthing and the remaining 31 miles from the crossing point to the Pons Aelius were constructed in turf, although after the completion of the second, Antonine, wall the turf section was also rebuilt in stone. It remains a question why the whole wall wasn't originally constructed in stone, as there was no shortage of building stone in Northern England, proved by rebuilding the turf wall in stone around 158 AD.

The stone wall had a rubble core between facings of dressed stone set in lime mortar. The estimated high of the wall is between 15 and 16 feet. Although we can not be certain as nowhere do the walls survive to their full height, however the evidence (from preserved stretches of stairways; etc.) suggests it wasn't lower than 15 feet. Also 15 feet would be necessary for a soldier on the top of the wall to see into the bottom of the ditch which run in front of the wall. The original width in which most of the foundation for the wall was built, was 10 feet.

However not everywhere the wall was built to its planned width. A change early on in the plan caused that we can find 3 different widths of the Wall. The original " Broad Wall" was built to planned 10 ft, whereas the 2 remaining parts of the Wall were build 8 and 6 ft wide, " the Narrow wall".