



5 Minutes in Classical History

Empire Without End: Hadrian's Wall

Transcript

Narrator: "To the Romans I assign no limit of things nor of time. To them I have given empire without end."

Hadrian's Wall: imperial Rome's defense against the marauding barbarians north of Britannia, the empire's northernmost province.

Construction of the wall began in 122 CE under Emperor Hadrian and took around six years to complete. Crossing northern Britain from the River Tyne, near the North Sea, to the Solway Firth on the Irish Sea, it is the largest Roman artifact anywhere. Sixteen forts were built into the wall, each housing 800 soldiers. Typically, each fort had its own stable, granary, hospital, and toilets. In between these large forts, a series of gates were guarded by a smaller fort or milecastle. This cross-section of the defensive structure shows the engineering skill of the ancient Romans. Comprised of a ditch, a wall, a military way, and vallum, it's easy to see how it would slow invading tribes.

The modification of the landscape to suit imperial Rome's purpose highlights their desire to impose their will upon the environment. Hadrian's Wall was a formidable physical barrier that also served an important symbolic function in terms of the ideology of empire. The Roman Empire, one of the largest in history, was at its most expansive in 117 CE under the Emperor Trajan. Roman rule extended across Africa, north of the Sahara, the Mediterranean, Gaul, the Balkans, Dacia, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, and areas of Germania and Britannia. Between 55 to 60 million people were under its rule, almost a quarter of the world population at the time.

Unlike his predecessor Trajan, Hadrian didn't continue the expansionist policy. Less obsessed with the concept of empire without end, Hadrian wanted to stabilize then consolidate the empire. His foreign policy encouraged peace through strength, rather than perpetual wars of conquest. And once built, the wall not only demarcated the Roman Empire's sphere of influence, but, in the Roman mind, the limit of the civilized world. Beyond it lay the barbarians. It was the line that separated order from chaos.

For the Romans, order was represented physically in the form of infrastructure: roads, aqueducts, amphitheaters, forums, and temples. And when urban centers were established, they were laid out on a grid. When the Roman Empire invaded and annexed a region, they wanted to conquer the people and gain territory. It was a political act and the intention was to civilize the barbaric tribes. Romanization—the assimilation of conquered people into





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the empire—occurred on a daily basis. After conquering the ancient Britons and Celts, the Romans introduced them to their concepts of religion, law, politics, and economics.

Along Hadrian's Wall, military supply contracts for food and resources were given to people near the fortified camps. But for the most part, interaction across the divide occurred regularly. Gates in the wall were used for commerce and trade, to collect tax, minimize smuggling, and control immigration.

Under Hadrian, the time of war, at least notionally, was over, and it was time for peace. Hadrian's Wall served many purposes, but perhaps its most important purpose was as a physical reminder of the intangible might and power of the Roman Empire. It reinforced Rome's supreme confidence that they could go anywhere and do anything.

