

Tales of the Frontier: political representations and practices inspired by Hadrian's Wall

Dr Richard Hingley (Principal Investigator), Department of Archaeology, University of Durham.

Start Date: 1 July 2007, Duration: 24 months



Hadrian's Wall is the one of the most evocative and powerful ancient monuments in Britain and the most famous frontier system (materially and culturally) of the Roman Empire. Its international significance is secured by a long tradition of scholarly study and its designation as a World Heritage Site. Since the late C16, the Wall has provided a major focus for antiquarians and archaeologists, with surveys and excavations providing respected and authoritative knowledge of its structure and chronology. But understanding the sequence of its construction and use is only one chapter in this monument's biography.

During the C18, the Wall became a tourist attraction and its popularity continues to grow, providing a significant venue for visitors from the UK and overseas. Like all monuments, the Wall promotes contradictory readings, including ideas of permanence and decay, domination and resistance, stability and mobility. How has this cultural prominence developed through time? How do various individuals and groups, including visitors, locals and scholars, view it? How do the ideas and beliefs of these individuals and constituencies differ? This project provides a 'post-colonial' reading of the visual and material texts of the Wall, undertaking an exploration of the significance of the Wall and its landscape as both monument and icon from the time of Bede (C8) to today. What role has it played in ideas about the origins of 'civilization' and the identities of self (English, Scottish, British) and others? How has its monumentality shaped the work of scholars and artists and the experiences of locals and visitors?

The project draws upon histories, handbooks, maps, excavation reports, novels, poems, works of art, photographs, museum displays and websites to explore how understandings have developed. The methodology assesses divergent individual and group claims, including: scholars, local people and foreign visitors. Assessment of the impact of the Wall upon people draws upon approaches to other linear sites (including Roman roads & the Great Wall of China). Through an evaluation of ideas about the linearity and permeability of the monument, the project addresses the historical context within which the Wall has been interpreted, publicised, visited and displayed.