

The Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site

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This paper outlines the history of the Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site and the challenges of management of this international site and the protection of individual sites as well as the whole. The integration of portable objects (inscriptions and artefacts) is discussed, given that these are exempt from the World Heritage classification. Finally, a vision for the future of the World Heritage Site is presented.

Key words: Roman, Frontiers, World Heritage, Management, UNESCO

Introduction

The concept behind World Heritage was to encourage the 'identification, protection and preservation of our global heritage'; this was adopted in the UNESCO 'Convention concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage' in 1972. It came into force in 1975 with the first inscriptions made on the list in 1978. Three sites in what is now Croatia were inscribed in 1979: Split and the Palace of Diocletian; Dubrovnik; and the Plitvice Lakes National Park.

The first Roman frontier to be inscribed was Hadrian's Wall in 1987, cited because of its exceptional nature, comprising a continuous linear barrier cutting across northern England from the mouth of the Solway Estuary in the west to the River Tyne in the east. Outstanding features of the monument included its ambitious and coherent system of defensive constructions (including the use of dressed stone), and the way it crosses some spectacular upland terrain (Fig. 1).

Hadrian's Wall remained the only Roman frontier on the list for well over a decade. In 1996 it was proposed that the Upper German-Raetian *Limes* should be nominated as a WHS and from 1999 to 2001, Professor Zsolt Visy, then President of the Hungarian National World Heritage Committee, consulted the delegates of other countries on the concept of a multi-national World Heritage Site (Breeze & Jilek 2008: 25). A discussion at the European Archaeological Association's Annual Conference at Esslingen in 2001 led to a proposal to create a single WHS encompassing the frontiers of the Roman Empire.

The following year, a round table deliberation at the European Association of Archaeology's Annual Conference in Thessaloniki sought to refine the proposal and determine the way forward. The particular focus of discussion was the creation of a research strategy for the European frontiers of the Roman Empire. To that end, it was agreed that an international data-base was required, with gaps in our information defined and public access to information improved, other potential elements of the WHS identified, and basic standards of site management promulgated. It was agreed that the European Union provided the most



Fig. 1. Hadrian's Wall at Mons Fabricius (photograph: D J Breeze).

obvious sources of finance for such a project. A first application to the European Science Foundation failed, as did a bid to the Culture 2000 Project, but the following year, 2005, a revised application was approved.

The Culture 2000 Frontiers of the Roman Empire (FRE) project (2005-8) not only provided the umbrella under which that project was pursued, but also discussions about how the FRE World Heritage Site (WHS) might develop. Perhaps, most importantly, it brought together archaeologists and site managers from nine European countries, many of whom had previously known each other through the Congresses of Roman Frontier Studies (*Limes Congresses*) and encouraged them to work towards the achievement of two rather different goals, the successful completion of the Culture 2000 FRE project and the creation of a new type of World Heritage Site.

The creation of a new type of World Heritage Site

The submission of the nomination of the Upper German-Raetian *Limes* to the World Heritage Centre in 2002 was supported by two letters from other countries. As a result, the World Heritage Centre in Paris summoned Andreas Thiel and Rheinhard Dietrich to discuss this and other aspects of the nomination. Out of this meeting came the proposal to create a World Heritage Site for Roman frontiers and for it to develop on an incremental basis. In order to achieve this, the form of listing of World Heritage Sites had to be changed to acknowledge the fact that there would be more than two elements to the Site, and the terminology changed from 'transboundary' to 'transnational'. In addition, at the request of the World Heritage Centre, a Summary Nomination Statement was produced which offered an overview of what might be included in the new WHS together with consideration of the management issues and how they might be approached (Breeze & Young 2008).

In order to achieve this aim, the States Party responsible for the original inscription – United Kingdom (UK) for Hadrian's Wall – needed to agree to its Site becoming part of a larger whole. Agreement was reached with the UK government meaning that the international partners could proceed. The Site was renamed the *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (FRE) in 2005 with the inscription of the Upper German-Raetian *Limes*. The Antonine Wall joined the Site in 2008.

The complexities of other serial nominations resulted in UNESCO proposing a revision in 2010 to the way in which such a Site could be put forward (UNESCO 2010). This meant the partners leading on the Frontiers of the Roman Empire nominations needed to reconsider our approach to the creation of the World Heritage Site. A new approach – thematic study and nomination strategy – was proposed and subsequently agreed by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in 2017 (Ployer *et al.* 2017). This is now being put into practice.



Fig. 2. The members of the Bratislava Group at UNESCO in Paris in 2006, Professor Sanader is third from left (photograph: D J Breeze).

The definition of the Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site

Following the European Archaeological Association's Annual Conference in Thessaloniki in 2002, a small group of Roman frontier archaeologists met in Bratislava to consider the way forward. Each of those present was a representative of their country's Minister of Culture, or its equivalent, and their initial aim was to decide how to obtain the finance to forward the ideas promulgated in Thessaloniki. The group rapidly widened its remit to consider other aspects of the FRE WHS and in 2005, now named the Bratislava Group, it was recognised by the World Heritage Committee as the appropriate body to provide advice on the development of the Site (Fig. 2). As such, the members were normally the nominated archaeological representatives of their countries, and usually the coordinator of the existing or proposed element of the FRE WHS.

One of the earliest tasks of the Bratislava Group was to define the proposed WHS. This led to the Koblenz Declaration:

The Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site should consist of the line(s) of the frontier at the height of the empire from Trajan to Septimius Severus (about 100-200), and military installations of different periods which are on that line. The installations include fortresses, forts and towers, the *limes* road, artificial barriers and immediately associated civil structures.

Subsequently, the Vienna Declaration clarified the wish to bring all appropriate elements of the frontiers into the WHS. These declarations were formulated at workshops sponsored by the Bratislava Group across Europe in the years from 2002 and 2005.

Management of World Heritage

In order to be inscribed, World Heritage Sites must meet one of ten criteria. A series of Operational Guidelines exists which must be followed both by sites seeking nomination and those inscribed on the list (UNESCO 2017). These outline expectations for management systems, reporting obligations, integrity and authenticity, and protection.



Map 1. Map of the Frontiers of the Roman Empire in the mid second century AD (Courtesy: D J Breeze).

The potential full extent of the Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site, as articulated in the thematic study (Ployer *et al.* 2017) and Koblenz declaration, covers a very broad range of management issues and physical landscape surroundings. These run from the deserts of north Africa to the mountains in Romania, and from the large rivers of the Danube and Rhine to the construction of artificial barriers in Britain, Germany and north Africa (Breeze 2011) (Map 1). All of these require different management approaches under a common framework.

As part of the FRE inscription, a tripartite management regime was established: the Inter-Governmental Committee (IGC) to oversee and coordinate management at an international level, comprising representatives from the UK and Germany with invited participation from other future potential FRE partners; the Bratislava Group discussed above; and a Management Group (known as the Hexham group after where it first met) involving those leading the day-to-day management of the Sites, which focuses on sharing best practice and also invites participation from future partners.

Artefacts and Museums

The legacy left by the Roman empire on and beyond its borders goes beyond the physical structural remains that can be visited in situ the length and breadth of the frontiers. A key component is the



Fig. 3. Reconstruction of the Bridgeness Stone in Bo'ness (Copyright: Historic Environment Scotland)

material culture remains – artefacts – as well as environmental evidence – ecofacts – illuminating the stories of frontier communities. Many such remains are now conserved and presented in museums, whether on site (such as at Aquincum in Hungary) or in other local, regional and national museums.

On the Antonine Wall in Scotland, there is a collection of distance stones, which provide a unique record of the building of the frontier by three legions, together with sculptural scenes which include telling the story of the ritual sacrifice at the beginning of the campaign, the fighting, and the (inevitable) Roman victory. These serve as monumental items of propaganda for the soldiers based on the frontier (Breeze & Ferris 2016). Nineteen survive – most are on display in the Hunterian Museum at the University of Glasgow, with the Bridgeness stone in the National Museum in Edinburgh (Fig. 3). Recent research using portable X-ray fluorescence and Raman Spectrometry has demonstrated that, far from being merely the sandstones that survive today, these were painted in bright colours. Red, for blood, has been detected around the neck of the decapitated captive on the Bridgeness stone (Campbell 2018).



Fig. 4. Leather boxing gloves from Vindolanda on display in their museum (Copyright: The Vindolanda Trust).

At Vindolanda on Hadrian's Wall, the waterlogged nature of the site has resulted in the remarkable survival of artefacts: from wooden toilet seats through to leather boxing gloves (Fig. 4). And, of course, the famous writing tablets for which the site is well known and enrichen our understanding of daily life on this northern frontier.

The most visible signs of Roman military activities in Croatia are the many inscriptions and items of sculpture, especially those on display in the Museum Osijek and at the church at Lug (Jilek 2009: 84–

6). These provide valuable evidence which is otherwise not well represented by extant remains in the countryside.

Inscriptions, items of sculpture, pottery and artefacts all provide vital information which help us to understand not only when, how, why and by whom the frontiers were constructed, but also how they operated and the nature of the lives of the soldiers who defended them together with their families and dependents. Whilst World Heritage status recognises monuments and sites, the associated artefacts are not covered by the World Heritage Convention. In 2015, however, UNESCO adopted a recommendation regarding the protection and promotion of museum collections (UNESCO 2015). This is an important step in helping to bring together the remnants of the Roman empire now treated, protected, and presented in different ways. A recent Creative Europe project (2016-19) known as Advanced Limes Apps (ALApp) has brought together specialists from Germany, Austria and Scotland to create a mobile app platform to disseminate new digital content for our Roman frontiers. The use of three-dimensional reconstructions and augmented reality helps to bring the sites and artefacts to life (Flügel 2018) and the platform is being made freely available to other Roman frontiers. Through collaboration and digital technology, we can enhance the visitor experience both out on sites and in our museums (Breeze 2018).

The Future for the Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site

The Thematic Study and Nomination Strategy (Ployer *et al.* 2017) was agreed by UNESCO at their World Heritage Committee meeting in Warsaw in 2017. It was recognised that the current FRE proposals concentrated on Europe and so the partners are progressing with the European nominations whilst also seeking to forge new relationships with relevant potential future partners in the Near East and North Africa.

Given that the creation of a single World Heritage Site was no longer an option, the agreed way forward was to keep the existing FRE property comprising the two Walls in Britain and the Upper German-Raetian Limes in Germany and create a further three FRE sites in Europe. First, the Danube *Limes*, perhaps the most complex given that eight countries are involved. All eight have their sections on their national Tentative Lists (a pre-requisite of nomination) and the proposal is for inscription in two phases. Part one comprises Germany (Bavaria), Austria, Hungary and Slovakia and is currently with UNESCO for consideration (2020). Part two will see the addition of Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania, extending the Site all the way to the Black Sea. The second FRE WHS will be the Lower German *Limes*, comprising sites on the River Rhine in the Netherlands and Germany (2021). The final FRE for Europe should see the inscription of various *Limes* in Dacia, reflecting the complexity of the remains in Romania. This is a long-term strategy and requires agreement at all levels, from the archaeologists working on the ground through to the upper echelons of government agreeing strategies for joint nomination and management. And even if we are successful in realising the vision of four European FRE World Heritage Sites across ten countries, the next challenge will be working with new partners in the Near East and North Africa to help them realise the vision of joining this partnership. Since we collectively embarked on this journey, the rules governing the way in which we take our ambition forward have changed, due, to some degree, to the success of transnational World Heritage Sites. But perhaps the rules can change again in the future, and the opportunity may arise to unite the various FRE World Heritage Sites into a single Site, particularly after demonstrating the success of the currently proposed management cluster. Or the approach may work so effectively that we do not see the need to unite but maintain our international collaboration and shared goals; one way to achieve that might be through the creation of a research strategy for Roman frontiers. The Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Site has the potential to truly meet some of the ideals of UNESCO, collaborating internationally on education, scientific research and culture.

To help achieve that end, the project is supported by the publication of a series of multi-language booklets on the frontiers of the Roman Empire. To date, booklets have been published on the Antonine Wall, Hadrian's Wall, the Lower German *Limes*, Bavaria (only available online), the Danube *Limes*, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Muntenia in Romania and North Africa, which has a version in Arabic as well as a second in English, French and German (for these and other publications see: www.limes-oesterreich.at). In addition, a DVD, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, has been produced by Boundary Productions, now edufilm (<https://www.edufilm.at/>).

Acknowledgement

We are grateful for the opportunity to present this short paper to Mirjana Sanader, who has represented Croatia on the Bratislava Group since its earliest days. It is thanks to her enthusiastic engagement in this international project that we have progressed this far and are now on the cusp of realising a wider ambition first articulated almost twenty years ago.

Abbreviations

FRE	Frontiers of the Roman Empire
WHS	World Heritage Site

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