

**ROMAN BRITANNIA (43  
CE TO 410 CE): EDGE  
OF THE ROMAN  
FRONTIER: HADRIAN'S  
WALL**



# ROMAN BRITANNIA (43 CE TO 410 CE): EDGE OF THE ROMAN FRONTIER: HADRIAN'S WALL

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain why Hadrian's Wall was built in the 2nd century by the Roman army, what it meant to live on the "Roman frontier" and how the wall is seen today by the people of Great Britain.

## Subjects

European History  
World History  
Anthropology

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Hadrian's Wall
- British Museum, London

## Essential Questions

- What is Hadrian's Wall?
- Why was Hadrian's Wall built?
- What was life like on the Roman frontier?
- Why is Hadrian's Wall one of the most visited sites in the world today?

## Academic Summary

And so, having reformed the army quite in the manner of a monarch, he set out for Britain, and there he corrected many abuses and was the first to construct a wall, eighty miles in length, which was to separate the barbarians from the Romans.

*From "Life of Hadrian" in Historia Augusta, approx. 4th century CE*

There is a good example of the Roman adoption and modification of a native camp at Hod Hill in Dorset. The Romans cut off a rectangular portion within the north-west corner, utilizing the old lines for the north and west sides, and completing the enclosure by their own, on the south and east. The remains were partially destroyed many years ago, when many Roman relics were found, including coins ranging from Augustus to Trajan.

*From "Military Remains" in Roman Era in Britain by John Ward, London: 1911*

Few Roman remains in Europe have attracted more attention than the two Walls, the lower stretching from the mouth of the Tyne to the Solway, and the upper across the narrower isthmus between the indents of the Forth and the Clyde. The term Wall does not convey an adequate idea of these great works. Each was a complex of forts, continuous rampart and ditch, military roads and outlying posts, planned with consummate skill and on an imperial scale; but in addition, the southern line has enigmatical features which have long been the subject of controversy.

Both lines appear to owe their inception to the military genius of Agricola. The strategic advantages of the upper isthmus were certainly recognized by him, for he held it by a number of posts; and it is probable that some of the forts upon or near the Solway-Tyne line were also due to him. His immediate successors lacked his energy, and during the period of border unrest which followed, the Caledonians made at least one serious inroad into the Province. To remedy this dangerous state of affairs, Hadrian, in accordance with his policy of consolidation rather than expansion, constituted the lower isthmus the frontier in A.D. 120. It is almost certain that the Agricolan posts of the upper isthmus had already long been abandoned; but twenty-five years after Hadrian's visit, and in consequence of further border trouble, Antoninus Pius fortified that isthmus with a 'wall.' This may have been dictated by a return to the 'forward' policy of Agricola, the intention being the conquest of North Britain by successive stages; or the object may have been to place the natives of the intervening country under a protectorate and thus create a friendly buffer-state between the Province and the Caledonians. Under any circumstance, the barrier of the lower isthmus continued to be held, and in fact served as the base whence detachments were drafted to man the upper line. This duplication of frontier lines, however, was of short duration and there is reason to think that the upper wall was abandoned at the time of the great Caledonian inrush of A.D. 180. The lower wall, on the other hand, continued to be the recognized frontier to the close of the Roman era.

... excavations between 1890 and 1893 proved that the rampart was constructed of turves or sods laid in definite courses resting upon a spread of rough stones between two kerbs of squared stones. The width of this foundation, averaging between 14 and 15 ft., indicates the original width of the rampart, which has spread under its own weight and the disintegrating effects of the weather. This discovery confirms the statements of Julius Capitolinus, who, writing about the close of the 3rd century, relates how Antoninus Pius conquered the Britons and built a murus cespitiarius. And the Welsh and English chroniclers, Gildas, Nennius, and Bede, tell obscurely of a turf and stone wall between the Picts and Scots of the north and the civilized population of the south.

*From "Military Remains" in Roman Era in Britain by John Ward, London: 1911*

Hadrian's Wall, built during the Emperor Hadrian's reign approximately 120 CE and thus bearing his name, was a Roman stone wall marking the extent of the Roman occupied lands in Britannia. Eighty Roman miles (73 modern miles) long, the wall stretches across the island of Great Britain from the North Sea to the Irish Sea. According to later sources, Hadrian, who had become emperor only a few years before the wall's construction, ordered the Roman army in Britain to construct a wall that would mark the edge of the frontier. It would mark the division between the civilized world of Britannia to the south, and the uncivilized world of the Scots and the Picts to the north.

Designed as a defensive barrier, it contained military forts and barracks every mile along the wall. It is believed that at its height during the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries that perhaps over 10,000 troops occupied the wall. According to the fragmented military sources that have survived to the present day, most historians and archaeologists believe the soldiers in such frontier positions would have been local citizens who had joined the Roman army rather than Italian or Roman citizens who had come up from Southern Europe. Occupied through the fall of Rome in the 5th century, the wall eventually fell into disuse, although archaeological remains show that portions of the wall may have been occupied for one purpose or another as late as the 8th century. Eventually, part of the wall was dismantled and the stones were reused in other medieval building projects (such as the Abbey Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Monkwearmouth), although medieval and Renaissance maps of the area show the wall as playing a prominent geographical part in the region. In the 18th century, General George Wade ordered the construction of a military road using stones from the ancient wall. It was only in the 19th century that preservation efforts began to restore and preserve the remainder of the wall. Today, the wall is under the control of the National Trust, and it was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987. Every year, thousands of visitors come to see the ancient frontier.

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain why Hadrian's Wall was built in the 2nd century by the Roman army, what it meant to live on the "Roman frontier" and how the wall is seen today by the people of Great Britain.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the different theories about how and why Hadrian's Wall was built in the 2nd century CE.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain what it was like to live on the Roman frontier during the imperial age.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Hadrian's Wall is seen today, both by Britons and by visitors from around the globe.

## Procedures

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Did Rome expand too much, too quickly? What made the Empire difficult to control by the end of the 1st century? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture – Brief overview of Hadrian's Wall and the Roman Frontier. (10 min)
- Video – Hadrian's Wall (40 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Hadrian's Wall and the Roman frontier, taking notes as appropriate. (15 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles/photographs to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion – Why was Hadrian's Wall built in the 2nd century CE? What was life like on the Roman frontier? How is the wall seen today? (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail why Hadrian's Wall was built in the 2nd century by the Roman army, what it meant to live on the "Roman frontier" and how the wall is seen today by the people of Great Britain.

## Extension

### On tour: Roman Army Museum at Hadrian's Wall

While on tour in Great Britain, students can visit the Roman Army Museum at Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland, where they can see for themselves primary and secondary sources relating to the wall and the Roman frontier, including letters written on blocks of wood from Roman soldiers. These writing tablets are delicate, wafer-thin slivers of wood and are the oldest surviving handwritten documents in Britain. They are now preserved under glass for all to see. The writings cover everything from official documents to letters from soldiers to their loved ones. One even mentions getting a package from home containing shirts and underwear, something older students can probably relate to, as many of them will probably receive similar notes from their parents when they are away at college.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia\\_Augusta/Hadrian/1\\*.html#note90](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia_Augusta/Hadrian/1*.html#note90)  
The Life of Hadrian from Historia Augusta (primary source)
- [penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/Places/Europe/Great\\_Britain/\\_Periods/Roman/\\_Texts/WARREB/3\\*.html#Hadrians\\_Wall](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/Places/Europe/Great_Britain/_Periods/Roman/_Texts/WARREB/3*.html#Hadrians_Wall)  
"Military Remains" from Roman Era in Britain, London: 1911
- [www.visithadrianswall.co.uk/](http://www.visithadrianswall.co.uk/)  
Hadrian's Wall (website) – official site for Hadrian's Wall
- [www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/vindolanda\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/vindolanda_01.shtml)  
Vindolanda (website article) – from Dr. Mike Ibeji on the BBC website
- [www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/hadrian\\_gallery.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/hadrian_gallery.shtml)  
Hadrian's Wall Gallery (website) – from the BBC. Contains over a dozen images of the wall.
- [www.aboutscotland.com/hadrian/](http://www.aboutscotland.com/hadrian/)  
Hadrian's Wall (website) – from about Scotland.
- [www.vindolanda.com/](http://www.vindolanda.com/)  
Vindolanda Charitable Trust website
- [www.northumberlandnationalpark.org.uk/understanding/historyarchaeology/hadrianswall](http://www.northumberlandnationalpark.org.uk/understanding/historyarchaeology/hadrianswall)  
Hadrian's Wall – History and Archaeology (website) – from the Northumberland National Park
- [www.roman-britain.org/frontiers/hw\\_history.htm](http://www.roman-britain.org/frontiers/hw_history.htm)  
Hadrian's Wall – History (website)
- [www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/housesteads-roman-fort-teachers-kit/housesteads-tk.pdf](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/housesteads-roman-fort-teachers-kit/housesteads-tk.pdf)  
Housesteads Roman Fort (PDF Teacher's Kit) – from English Heritage
- [www.beggarbog.co.uk/frontier.html](http://www.beggarbog.co.uk/frontier.html)  
The Story of Hadrian's Wall (website)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeosZImCrMY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeosZImCrMY)  
Hadrian's Wall (video) – shorter (6 min) video by the History Channel on the basics of Hadrian and his famous frontier wall
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNoa9hwbW9M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNoa9hwbW9M)  
Hadrian's Wall: The Complete Story (video) – BBC documentary on Hadrian's Wall and the Roman frontier. At 50 minutes long, this video might be too long for some classes, but it is well worth it. Outstanding documentary with great images and computer graphics. Highly recommended for students and teachers.

### Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hadrian%27s\\_Wall](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hadrian%27s_Wall)  
Hadrian's Wall – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hadrian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hadrian)  
Emperor Hadrian – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vindolanda\\_tablets](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vindolanda_tablets)  
Vindolanda tablets – Wikipedia article
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/the\\_united\\_kingdom/country\\_profile](http://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/country_profile)  
On the Road: Britain (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel

### Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/roman-britannia](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/roman-britannia)  
Roman Britain – An Overview
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/roman-gaul-gallic-wars](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/roman-gaul-gallic-wars)  
Roman Gaul – The Gallic Wars

## Key Terms

- Barbarians
- Frontier
- Hadrian
- Roman Empire

