



The Bridgeness Slab (RIB 2139)

Bridgeness Slab (RIB 2139)



[1]

[Suovetaurilia on the right hand panel of the Bridgeness Slab.](#) [2]



[3]

Name of the artist: Unknown.

Patron/Sponsor: Antoninus Pius

Original Location/Place:

Bridgeness, West Lothian, Scotland.

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, Edinburgh. Inventory number: X.FV 27.

Original Inscription/Graffito: Publication: [RIB 2139](#) [4]

Diplomatic:

IMP CAES TITO AELIO
HADRI ANTONINO
AVG PIO P P LEG II
AVG PER M P IIII DCLII
FEC

Edition:

Imp(eratori) Caes(ari) Tito Aelio
Hadri(ano) Antonino
Aug(usto) Pio p(atri) p(atriciae) leg(io) II
Aug(usta) per m(ilia) p(assuum) IIII DCLII
fec(it)

Translation:

(The translation is my own)

For Emperor Caesar Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antoninus Augustus Pius, father of the fatherland, the Second Legion Augusta made (this) for a distance of 4,652 paces.

Description:

A large, rectangular slab of sandstone divided into three decorative or inscribed fields. The inscription is set within a central panel, enclosed by a plain frame with the forms of *peltae* at the sides. The horns of the *peltae* end in griffin heads. Two figurative scenes are carved in relief on either side of the inscription panel, from which they are separated on the left and right by spiral columns. The left hand scene depicts a Roman soldier on horseback,



trampling over four naked combatants. The right hand scene is one of a sacrifice, performed by members of the *Legio II Augusta*, whose name is inscribed on a military banner in the background.

Date: 142 CE

Material: Buff sandstone.

Measurements: Height: 1.19m

Length: 2.79m

Depth: 0.15m

Commentary: Excavated in 1868 from Bridgeness, in West Lothian, Scotland, this is the largest of the ‘distance slabs’ set up by the soldiers who built the new frontier of the Antonine Wall in Britain, in c. 142 CE. It marked the east terminus of the wall, and is the most elaborately decorated of the twenty or so slabs that have been excavated from it. It is an important example of Antonine frontier policy in Britain, and the collective identity of the Roman army that was based there.

The construction of a second wall close to the Romano-British border with Scotland so soon after Hadrian’s Wall had been built might appear an odd decision for the new emperor Antoninus Pius. His predecessor, and adoptive father, had instigated the building of a fortification wall in 122 CE, following his visit to the province, which was barely complete by the time of his death in 138 CE. Although in places Hadrian’s Wall was less than a mile away from Scottish territory, it was unlikely to have been intended as a formal frontier, and was more probably motivated by issues of control, such as the movement of people and goods, or policing (Breeze and Dobson, *Hadrian’s Wall*, p. 40; 52; 91). In keeping with Hadrian’s policy of consolidation, the wall represented the containment and organisation of Roman territory, rather than the defence of it, with people likely moving in, out of and within the *limes* on a daily basis. The wall was also a visible symbol of Roman power, whose whitewashed façade would have advertised the strength and stability of her presence to those outside of her reaches.

The Antonine Wall, however, was motivated by a new forward policy in Britain that aimed at traditional expansion and conquest. Very soon after he came to power, Antoninus Pius appointed a new governor of Britain, Lollius Urbicus, who was sent with orders to reoccupy southern Scotland and to construct a new wall that both defended and defined the area now under Rome’s control (Breeze and Dobson, *Hadrian’s Wall*, p. 88. For the geography and construction of the wall, see *ibid*, p. 90-105). According to Pausanias, the occupation of this stretch of southern Scotland had been necessitated by disturbances along the border, in which a non-Roman tribe had invaded Roman territory; the exact situation is not clear but whatever had occurred, it resulted in the only war for which Antoninus Pius accepted the acclamation of *Imperator*, indicating the significance of his victory (Breeze and Dobson, *Hadrian’s Wall*, p. 89; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, VIII.43.3-4). Given the relative insecurity of Antoninus Pius’s succession, and the general hostility of the Roman senate to Hadrian in the final years of his life, it is probable that this short war in Britain, and the resulting extension to the Roman border, won the new emperor some political advantage in Rome, that “outweighed any long-term disadvantages for frontier control in Britain” (Breeze and Dobson, *Hadrian’s Wall*, p. 90).

The distance slabs that have been excavated from the length of the wall reveal that three legions were responsible for its construction: the *Legio II Augusta*, the *Legio VI Victrix*, and the *Legio XX Valeria Victrix*. The length of the wall had been divided up roughly equally between these three detachments, which set up (and in fact most likely also made) the slabs as a documentary record of their contribution, recording the name of the legion responsible, and the length – given in either ‘paces’ or ‘Roman feet’ – of wall that it had built. The Bridgeness Slab, the largest known from the site, is a particularly fine example. In the centre of the slab is an inscription, which states that the *Legio II Augusta* had constructed a distance of 4562 paces (*legio II / Augusta per milia passuum IIII DCLII / fecit*). The inscription panel is framed with a simple moulding, at the sides of which are curved *peltae*, small crescent shaped ornaments representing Thracian shields. In the relief panel to the left of the inscription is a scene that describes the Roman campaigns that took place prior to the construction of the wall; a member of the Roman cavalry is depicted within an archway on horseback, wearing a Roman helmet, carrying a shield on his left arm with a cloak billowing behind him. He holds a spear, which is pointed down towards the four naked warriors, presumably natives of Scotland, over whom the horse is trampling. One of the warriors has been decapitated, another lies beneath the horse, while a third is falling forwards with a spear protruding from his back. The fourth figure is seated against the spiral column that separates the scene from the inscription, in the customary pose of the *provincia capta* (Phillips, “The Roman Distance Slab,” p. 177). The implication of the scene is clear: Rome fought a bloody campaign against the native Scots, against whom they were victorious. This is emphasised by the scene on the right of the inscription, which shows the sacrifice of a *suovetaurilia* within an *aedicula*, or shrine – indicated by the



triangular pediment. The *suovetaurilia* was a special kind of purification ritual, which involved the sacrifice of a bull, a pig and a sheep to Mars, in return for his purification of the land, the legion and its standards, which can be seen in the background of the relief (Keppie, *Roman Distance Slabs*, p. 9; for whether it is a Roman Standard, or a *vexillum* that is represented here, see Breeze, "The flag of legion II Augusta," p. 133–142. For the history of the *suovetaurilia*, see Beard, North and Price, *Religions of Rome*, I, p.112-113).

There has been much discussion regarding the quality of these figurative reliefs, and the evidence they provide for the "naïve" desire of provincial communities to imitate the art of metropolitan centres. They demonstrate the so-called 'trickle-down' effect of Romanisation, by which Roman soldiers, familiar with the art and architecture of urban capitals, brought its 'art' to native or indigenous communities, who attempted to replicate it with varying degrees of success (for essays on this subject, see Scott and Webster, *Roman Imperialism and Provincial Art*). The figures depicted on something like the Bridgeness Slab have been criticised for their lack of Hellenistic sophistication, and the crude rendering of body types, spatial organisation and clichéd imagery, but, as Natalie Kampen has argued, we should not be looking at the ways that such reliefs were produced, nor their similarity to existing models. She suggests that we should rather consider the reliefs for what they meant to the audiences who viewed them ("The Art of Soldiers," p. 127-128). In the case of the legionary forces stationed along the Antonine Wall, the distance slabs may have worked to generate a new sense of identity; the legionary detachments building the wall were likely made up of soldiers from all over the empire, and so the participation in a common style of relief, such as that found in the distance slabs, helped to create a version of 'Romanness' that was common to all, irrespective of the soldier's origins and backgrounds. Here, Rome was not characterised by familiarity with the landscape of the capital, but by the common purpose of conquest, sacrifice, and the construction of the wall. The soldiers essentially became "collective patrons" of a public monument; the style of the monument was less important than the setting up of it and the ritual of self-commemoration that it offered (Kampen, "The Art of Roman Soldiers," p. 132).

The distance slabs appear to have been set up into the sides of the completed ramparts, where they would have been visible to all who passed the wall. As well as working to communicate a shared identity amongst the legions stationed on the wall, the slabs also sent a clear message to the native communities now under their control. The Latin inscriptions in the centre of the slabs represented the 'civilisation' brought to the conquered territory in the form of language and the administration that that language governed, but the strongest propaganda came from the carved reliefs, which advertised Roman victory and occupation. Unlike the Hadrianic Wall, which marked the consolidation of Roman power in the region, the Antonine Wall represented the "culmination of successful military campaigns, by which the limits of the Empire had been extended" (Keppie, *Roman Distance Slabs*, p. 8). The distance slabs and their decoration, depicting the suppression of any local resistance, and the victory celebrations of the Roman soldiers were the final statement of the strength of Roman power at the very fringes of the Empire.

Thematic keywords:

- [Hadrian](#) [5]
- [Hadrian's Wall](#) [6]
- [Antoninus Pius](#) [7]
- [Antonine Wall](#) [8]
- [Britannia](#) [9]
- [wall](#) [10]
- [frontier](#) [11]
- [Scotland](#) [12]
- [barbarians](#) [13]
- [province](#) [14]
- [Roman army](#) [15]
- [Roman soldiers](#) [16]
- [conquest](#) [17]
- [sacrifice](#) [18]
- [distance](#) [19]
- [Roman power](#) [20]
- [Roman victory](#) [21]
- [Roman control](#) [22]
- [Roman occupation](#) [23]



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Other sources connected with this document: Sarcophagus

[Ludovisi Sarcophagus](#) [32]

- [Read more about Ludovisi Sarcophagus](#) [32]

Text

[Tacitus, Agricola XXI](#) [33]

The adoption of Roman culture by the Britons.

- [Read more about Tacitus, Agricola XXI](#) [33]

Text

[Tacitus, Agricola XXIX-XXXII](#) [34]

Calgacus's speech against Rome.

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Text

[Justin Martyr, Second Apology I-II](#) [35]

Appeal for reform in trials of Christians

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- [1] http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/sites/default/files/styles/large/public/romanwallinscotl00macduoft_raw_0197.jpg?itok=tHcak9Qs
- [2] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/file/suovetaurilia-right-hand-panel-bridgeness-slab>
- [3] http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/sites/default/files/styles/large/public/romanwallinscotl00macduoft_raw_0409.jpg?itok=CbcqR0B8
- [4] <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/2139>
- [5] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/hadrian>
- [6] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/hadrians-wall>
- [7] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/antoninus-pius>
- [8] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/antonine-wall>
- [9] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/britannia>
- [10] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/wall>
- [11] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/frontier>
- [12] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/scotland>
- [13] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/barbarians>
- [14] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/province>
- [15] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/roman-army-0>
- [16] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/roman-soldiers>
- [17] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/conquest>
- [18] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/sacrifice>
- [19] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/distance>
- [20] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/roman-power>
- [21] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/roman-victory>
- [22] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/roman-control>
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- [29] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/roman-distance-slabs-antonine-wall-brief-guide>
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- [32] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/ludovisi-sarcophagus>
- [33] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/tacitus-agricola%C2%A0xxi>
- [34] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/tacitus-agricola%C2%A0xxix-xxxii>
- [35] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/justin-martyr-second-apology-i-ii>
- [36] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/erc-team/caroline-barron>