NO PREP

Hadrian's Wall

The Edge of Empire

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Hadrian's Wall: The Edge of Empire

Building the Edge of the World

In 122 CE, Emperor Hadrian visited the province of Britannia and ordered the construction of a wall across the narrowest point of northern England, from the Solway Firth in the west to the mouth of the River Tyne in the east — a distance of 117 kilometers. The wall was built from stone in the east and turf in the west (later replaced with stone), rising to roughly five or six meters in height and three meters thick, with a deep ditch on the northern side and a military road running parallel on the south. At regular intervals of one Roman mile (approximately 1.5 km), a small fort called a milecastle housed a garrison and controlled a gateway through the wall. Larger forts like Housesteads, Vindolanda, and Chesters spaced roughly every five Roman miles accommodated full auxiliary units of 500 to 1,000 soldiers. Why did Hadrian build it? The answer is more complicated than simple military defense. Hadrian was a very different emperor from his predecessor Trajan, who had expanded the empire to its maximum extent. Hadrian believed the empire had

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Who Guarded the Wall?

The legions who built Hadrian's Wall did not garrison it. The daily work of maintaining the frontier fell to auxiliary units (soldiers recruited from across the empire, often from provinces far from Britain). Excavations along the wall have uncovered unit records and inscriptions showing soldiers from Spain, France, Belgium, North Africa, the Danube region, and the Middle East. A unit of archers

from Syria, the First Cohort of Hamians, guarded the wall section near modern Carvoran. Soldiers from what is now Iraq and Iran were shivering in the North English drizzle, a fact that speaks volumes about the empire's logistical reach and cultural complexity. These auxiliary soldiers were not Roman citizens when they enlisted, though service earned citizenship after 25 years, a powerful incentive that Rome used to recruit broadly. They brought their home cultures with them. The Mithras cult, originating in Persia, had temples at several wall forts. Syrian soldiers imported their foods and religious practices into the most remote Roman frontier, creating a cultural mix that the Roman Empire fostered wherever it went.

The Vindolanda Tablets: Personal Letters from the Frontier

Of all the archaeological discoveries associated with Hadrian's Wall, none are more extraordinary than the Vindolanda tablets. Found at the fort of Vindolanda just south of the wall during excavations beginning in 1973, these are thin slivers of wood (roughly postcard-sized) on which Roman soldiers and their families wrote in ink using a pointed stylus. The waterlogged, oxygen-poor soil preserved them when almost nothing organic survives in British ground conditions. The tablets cover the period around 100 CE, slightly before the wall's construction, and provide a window into garrison life of unprecedented intimacy. One tablet, probably the most famous, is a birthday party invitation from Claudia Severa, wife of a fort commander, to her friend Sulpicia Lepidina: 'I give you a warm invitation to come to us on the 11th of September, sister, to make the day more enjoyable for me by your arrival.' The casual warmth of the letter, written nearly two thousand years ago, is startling. Other tablets include requests for beer and food supplies, complaints about local conditions, and a soldier's wish for underpants and socks: the cold British weather apparently being insufficiently accounted for in the imperial supply chain.

The Wall After Rome: Legacy and Modern Status

Roman troops left Britannia in the early fifth century CE, and the wall's garrison was withdrawn. The wall did not fall dramatically — it was gradually dismantled. Local people took the stone for their own buildings, a process that continued for over a thousand years. Medieval churches, farmhouses, and the city of Carlisle itself were built from Hadrian's Wall stone. Today, the best-preserved section runs through the dramatic landscape of Northumberland, where the wall follows the volcanic ridge of the Whin Sill with views stretching for miles in every direction. It was designated

a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987 and attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. The 117 km Hadrian's Wall Path, a national walking trail opened in 2003, allows walkers to traverse the entire length of the frontier.

Key Information: Hadrian's Wall

Detail	Information
Construction Ordered	122 CE by Emperor Hadrian
Total Length	117 kilometers across northern England
Wall Height	~5-6 meters; width ~3 meters
Milecastles	Small forts at every Roman mile (~1.5 km) controlling gateways
Garrison Troops	Auxiliary units from Spain, Syria, North Africa, and the Danube region
Vindolanda Tablets	Personal letters on wood found from 1973 onward, dated c. 100 CE
Most Famous Tablet	Birthday party invitation from Claudia Severa, c. 100 CE
UNESCO Status	World Heritage Site since 1987

Case Study: A Letter from the End of the World

Flavius Cerialis is prefect of the Ninth Cohort of Batavians, stationed at Vindolanda. It is late October, 104 CE, and he is writing a letter home to his brother in what is now the Netherlands. He dips his stylus into the ink and scratches onto a thin strip of wood. 'Brother, the weather here is as I predicted — miserable beyond description. We have had no sun in seventeen days. The men are complaining about the cold, which I find embarrassing since we are supposed to be soldiers and not children. I have applied for additional supplies of warm clothing three times without response. The Brittunculi — the wretched little Britons — are apparently not put off by weather that would stop a normal person from leaving his house. We had three incidents at the north gate last week.' He pauses. This next part is delicate. He is not supposed to complain about the supply chain in official correspondence. But this is his brother. 'We have received no beer for two months. The local ale is undrinkable. The garrison is surviving on vinegar wine and irritability. If you have any influence with the procurement office in Eboracum, I beg you to use it. Otherwise, send socks.' He rolls up the wooden strip, wraps it, and sends it south. Whether his brother ever receives it, history does not record. But archaeologists find it in the mud at Vindolanda nineteen hundred years later, and his complaints are read by millions.

1. What does Flavius's letter reveal about the daily realities of life on Rome's northern frontier that official military records would not show?

2. The Vindolanda tablets show soldiers from across the empire stationed in Britain. What does this tell us about how Rome managed its vast territory?

Multiple Choice

1. What did completing 25 years of military service earn for auxiliary soldiers who were not Roman citizens?

a) Promotion to the Praetorian Guard

b) Roman citizenship

c) A pension equal to a senator's income

d) Land grants in their home provinces

2. What is the main reason the Vindolanda tablets survived when almost nothing organic survives in British soil?

a) Roman ink chemically preserved the wood over centuries

b) They were stored in airtight bronze containers

c) Waterlogged, oxygen-poor soil conditions prevented decomposition

d) They were buried under a stone floor that protected them from moisture

3. What does the reading suggest about Hadrian's reason for building the wall?

a) He was responding to a specific major military invasion from the north

b) He wanted to expand the empire northward into Scotland

c) He was building a monument to his own greatness

d) He believed the empire had overextended and needed manageable borders

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Milecastle	A) Syrian archer unit stationed at Carvoran on Hadrian's Wall
2. ___ Auxiliary	B) Dismissive Latin nickname meaning 'wretched little Britons' used in soldier letters
3. ___ Vindolanda tablets	C) Non-citizen soldiers recruited across the empire who earned citizenship after 25 years
4. ___ First Cohort of Hamians	D) Small fort built every Roman mile along Hadrian's Wall controlling a gateway
5. ___ Brittunculi	E) Wooden writing tablets found at a wall fort, revealing intimate details of garrison life

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Hadrian's Wall stretched 117 kilometers from the Solway Firth in the west to the mouth of the River _____ in the east.

2. The most famous Vindolanda tablet is a birthday party _____ from Claudia Severa to her friend Sulpicia Lepidina.

3. Hadrian's Wall was designated a UNESCO World _____ Site in 1987.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why does the reading say Hadrian's Wall was built for reasons more complicated than simple military defense?

2. What does the cultural diversity of the wall's garrison reveal about the Roman Empire as a political and social system?

3. Why are the Vindolanda tablets considered one of the most extraordinary archaeological discoveries associated with the wall?