

Antonius Walks the Wall

A brief description of the trials and tribulations encountered by Antonius along the wall built on the command of our most divine and imperial majesty Hadrian: 3rd October – 5th October 2008.

The year 2008 has seen a veritable plethora of documentaries, books, articles, and academic papers revolving around the Emperor Hadrian. This wealth of information has brought, to the wider public, a new interest and understanding of the man, his times, his travels, his sexuality, his alleged anti-Semitism, and his vast building projects.

Having consumed the best part of a bottle of Cote du Rhone whilst watching a BBC documentary on Hadrian in the early summer of 2008, I decided that I'd like to walk his most famous edifice. Having resolved, albeit in a tipsy state, to do this challenge I asked for assistance from my friend Clare and the Comitatus. My best friend had recently been diagnosed with breast cancer so this trek presented an ideal opportunity to raise some cash for Cancer Research UK, show solidarity with my friend, and in return for the lending of Roman garb and valuable advice, raise the profile of the Comitatus.

The following media interest in my quest and the ensuing begging, borrowing and stealing of kit need not concern the reader. Safe to say that through the kindness of others (notably Clare and John from the Comitatus, and Adrian at Armamentaria) I managed to cobble together an authentic 4th century kit and get to Wallsend on the 3rd October to begin my personal challenge.

As a non-member of Comitatus I feel that a few of the more overriding memories and experiences that I endured would be interesting and, perhaps, useful to the group. That is for the reader to decide.

As I was walking the 84 miles from Wallsend to Bowness it goes without saying that footwear was major factor in the success or failure of my mission. Adrian from Armamentaria kindly donated a pair of 4th century Roman fell boots as his donation to Cancer Research UK. The boots arrived with fearsome looking hobnails and after consultation with John I decided to walk them in and insert a lamb's wool insole to combat the expected pain from rogue hobnails puncturing the sole of the fell boot. This was the case and after arriving at Chollerford (near Chesters and only 32 miles into the walk) I could feel a hobnail or two biting through the insoles. I took an extra pair which I inserted on day 3 but by day 5 the 2nd, and last, insoles were on the brink of being breached.

Despite many days walking in the hills around my native Saddleworth breaking in the Roman footwear I found the fell boot an opponent rather than ally. My first night spent under canvas at Heddon was spent lamenting the loss of a chunk of my heel. The loss of heel skin was around 4cm by 5cm and was too large to blister and certainly too exposed to vigorous marching to

heal. This eventually led to a visit to Dr Brodie of the Brampton Medical Centre who cleaned my pungent wound and gave me dressings to get me through the walk. Of course the 4th century Roman wouldn't be walking on the A69 or the unforgiving tarmac and paving slabs of Northumbria but I'm convinced that the fell boot must have dished out similar experiences to raw recruits. Another noticeable effect of wearing the boot was the pain to my ankles. By day 5 it felt as if my ankles were brittle and made of glass. I live in very hilly countryside and my modern walking boots tend to effect my knees after a good hike. The fell boot struck me as something that singled out ankles, rather than knees, for particular vindictive treatment.

The only positives I gained from 84miles in these boots from hell were the clanking and rather militaristic sound that the hobnails give when walking on tarmac and paving slab as this helped me assume a soldier character. In truth it sounded more Berlin 1933 than Birdoswald 2008! The other impressive trait of the boots was the grip they afforded on the last day. Upon leaving Carlisle there is a few miles of farmland situation on rising ground besides the River Eden. The elements had made this very slippery and challenging but I conquered this stretch like a sprightly mountain goat. They truly gave great grip all the more impressive when the load I was carrying is considered.

The attempt at eating a Roman diet was problematic from the start. Preservation of food being an issue forced the consuming of Pecorino Romano cheese and Parma style Italian ham. As I was walking alone cooking utensils were an extra weight so I opted for 'deli' food instead. Olives, nuts, sprats were all consumed but never gave me as much enjoyment as when I eat them at home or in a swanky Manchester restaurant although they did bring about a noticeable improvement in stamina. If walking with a group, or even just another Roman, I would change my diet and attempt cooking. At least another Roman would share the weight of ingredients and utensils.

This leads me to loneliness. It does sound dramatic but cold nights in October do drag and feel very trying without a joke or someone to whinge at. I found myself talking to Emperor Hadrian at nights? I imagined the Emperor was a shoulder to cry on but this imaginary Emperor was a poor substitute for another Roman or two. Tears were shed with regard to my ankle wound, the cold, the rain, and the magnitude of the task ahead of me. I did feel rather emotional for the duration of the walk. It appeared that within an hour I could be confident about my prospects and then sullen and dejected. I can only conclude that this was due to the diet (not really endorphin releasing fare) and the lack of human conversation (although livestock was always willing to engage).

In conclusion I would say that although my walk was completed in 5 days as planned, and I have almost raised my target fundraising amount I really underestimated the magnitude of walking the wall in 4th century persona. It is one thing to complete the wall in modern walking attire but it is a completely different experience to walk those same 84miles in Roman attire. Would I do it again? Yes.... and next year I expect at least a cohort to walk with!