

# A History of the Congress of Roman Frontier Studies 1949-2024





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# A History of the Congress of Roman Frontier Studies 1949-2024

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Rebecca H. Jones and Andreas Thiel

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For Siegmar von Schnurbein

who led the Congress of Roman Frontier Studies for many years



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A note on terminology. The Congress is referred to as the International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies or Limes Congress or Limeskongress. 'Limes' is the Roman term for a frontier, though, just to complicate matters, it originally meant a road. In this book, we will refer to the Limes Congress, but when referring to the frontier, *limes* will be used, as in the German *limes*. Even this leads to complications because the correct name for the World Heritage Property is the 'Obergermanisch-Raetischer Limes'. We crave the indulgence of our readers for our efforts in seeking uniformity of expression.

The Congress has also taken place over a period of time when several countries have changed their names. We have attempted to retain some consistency but, again, have made a judgement call and hope our readers can tolerate some of our decisions.

## Preface

In 1949, in the aftermath of a devastating war, Eric Birley organised the First Congress of Roman Frontier Studies. His aim was not only to pursue the study of Roman frontiers but also to take a step towards restoring harmony in international relations within this field of research. Complete delivery of his aim was not possible as several German archaeologists were still Prisoners of War in Soviet Union. These include Kurt Stade, with whom Birley had planned the First Congress in Berlin in 1939 while attending the Sixth International Archaeology Congress. Stade had excavated with Birley at Birdoswald on Hadrian's Wall in 1929, together with Ian Richmond and Shimon Applebaum. The friendships formed there were to last through decades and Applebaum went on to organise the Seventh Congress in Tel Aviv in 1967 and attend its successor in Cardiff in 1969.

The pattern had been set early on: the exchange of information, networking and friendship. These three elements remain at the core of the approach of those organising and attending the Congress. They are reinforced by the pattern of the meetings, usually held every three years. The programme includes not only lectures but also visits to the local Roman military sites led by appropriate specialists. Over several Congresses, it is possible to inspect many of the iconic Roman military installations around the Roman Empire, and in particular observe them in their landscape settings. Alas, however, not all, as it has proved impossible to hold a Congress in North Africa and several of the countries of the Middle East.

Over the 73 years since the First Congress, membership has grown enormously with more lecture theatres and more coaches being required every meeting. In this year of publication, 2022, we hold the twenty-fifth Congress at Nijmegen in the Netherlands, a city well known to Roman frontier archaeologists and early medieval scholars alike. Here, we anticipate that around 400 archaeologists will gather to continue their voyages of exploration. For newer participants, we hope this book will help them understand the body they have joined; for older friends, this will be a reminder of friendships made and strengthened; for all, we trust that it will be a spur to continuing investigations and research into Rome's greatest monument, its frontiers; for this year, it will be a celebration of the twenty-fifth Congress of Roman Frontier Studies.

The exercise of creating this book has made us realise that there are greater stories to be told than in these pages, through the development of the study of Roman frontiers and the role of the Congress of Roman Frontier Studies in this process. This story is populated by many of the well-known archaeologists of the last 75 years and, indeed, earlier as the genesis of the Congress lies in the inter-War years. It is also a story

of international cooperation and redemption. In preparing this book, we have used known archives, such as that at Vindolanda, as well as that maintained by the first author and now donated to the Römisch-Germanische Kommission in Frankfurt. We have also discovered other archives, such as that of Albert Egges van Giffen in the library of Groningen University and Eric Birley's file at the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, and no doubt others exist. These archives, covering the whole history of the Congress, stand ready for further study.

David J. Breeze, Edinburgh  
Tatiana Ivleva, Leiden  
Rebecca H. Jones, Peebles  
Andreas Thiel, Esslingen

### **Preface to the second edition**

The first edition of this volume was produced in 2022 to mark the 25th Congress of Roman Frontiers Studies at Nijmegen in the Netherlands. Thanks to sponsorship from the Municipality of Nijmegen, every participant at the Congress was given a copy. Feedback on the volume and subsequent research has led to new information coming to light which has been incorporated in this second edition. This has been most notable in the identification of people on a photograph at that first Congress in 1949 (Cover and Figure 8). The authors welcome additional information on past conferences, in particular on participants, especially those who can be identified on photographs such as those on Figures 16 and 34. Tatiana Ivleva undertook the bulk of the editing work of this second edition with Rebecca Jones providing the report on the Nijmegen Congress.



## Introduction

The remains of Roman frontiers lie in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, physical manifestations of Rome's imperial policy (Figure 1). Known and recorded in various ways for centuries, it was the development of archaeological activities in the 19th century that brought them to greater attention. The history of research into the various frontiers around the Empire is full of the names of famous scholars. They include John Collingwood Bruce on Hadrian's Wall, Flóris Rómer in Hungary, Rudolf Brünnow and Alfred von Domaszewski in Jordan, Antoine Poidebard in Syria, Aurel Stein in Iraq and Jordan and of course, Theodor Mommsen in Germany and beyond, whose magnum opus on *Römische Geschichte* (*History of Rome*) was one reason for his award of the second Nobel Prize for Literature in 1902. The *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (*CIL*) that he established remains the authoritative source for Roman epigraphy.

It was Mommsen's agitation for *Limes* research that led to the foundation of the Reichs-Limeskommission (RLK) in 1892. Two years earlier, in 1890, the Glasgow Archaeological Society had undertaken seminal excavations on the Antonine Wall; also in the 1890s, the Oxford scholar Francis Haverfield started his research on Hadrian's Wall. This and subsequent decades were formative in establishing archaeological understanding of Roman frontiers.

Research into the archaeological phenomena of the border provinces of the Roman Empire continued to gain prominence into the 20th century. The German scholar Ernst Fabricius, (head of the RLK from 1902) was in regular contact with Eric Birley from Britain, whose lifelong interest in Hadrian's Wall began whilst a student at Oxford in the 1920s and further developed during his tenure at Durham University. Fabricius sent his assistant, Kurt Stade, to the excavations at Birdoswald in 1929 (Figure 2). These excavations became famous for the artefacts and inscriptions uncovered, which influenced research on Hadrian's Wall for some 50 years.



Figure 1. Map of the provinces and frontiers of the Roman Empire in the mid 2nd century AD (produced for the Frontiers of the Roman Empire EU Culture 2000 project)

## INTRODUCTION



Figure 2. The 1929 excavations at Birdoswald, from left to right, John Charlton, Eric Birley, Mr Hunter a student, F.G. Simpson, Mr Addison a student, Kurt Stade, Shimon Applebaum, R.G. Collingwood. Ian Richmond took the photograph