CONTEXTUALIZING HADRIAN’S WALL: 
THE WALL AS ‘DEBATABLE LANDS’

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1. Introduction

This article emphasizes the symbolic monumentality of Hadrian’s Wall, exploring the idea that it was a porous and contested frontier. There has been a recent outpouring of archaeological and management publications on Hadrian’s Wall, which provide substantial new knowledge and improve our understanding of the structure. In light of the state-of-play with Wall studies today, our motivation here is twofold. Firstly, we aim to encourage the opening up research on Hadrian’s Wall to a broad series of questions deriving from studies of frontiers and borders in other cultural contexts. There are many new approaches to contemporary and historic borderlands and frontiers, stemming from geography, history, cultural studies and English literature, and we wish to promote a broad comparative approach to Roman frontiers that draws upon this wider frontier-research. Secondly, our approach draws upon recent writings that formulate new approaches to Roman identities and social change.
exploring the significance of these works to the interpretation of the building and peopling of Hadrian's Wall.

To open up research, this paper argues that studies of Hadrian's Wall can turn their focus onto the dialogic, transformative and contested nature of the structures that define the Roman frontier-zone. By drawing cross-cultural comparisons here, we are not trying to claim a cross-cultural, cross-temporal logic for the creation of all frontier works and zones, but we are aiming to view Roman frontiers from a broader perspective in order to open new lines of enquiry and, hopefully, to stimulate new research.

Some accounts of ancient monuments explore the idea of contested landscapes to address contemporary contexts—a well-explored example in Britain is Barbara Bender's assessment of Stonehenge and contemporary Druids. Elsewhere, the contested nature of Hadrian's Wall is beginning to be addressed in 'art' and scholarship. To pursue this aim, we draw upon recent writings that focus upon Roman imperial identity in an attempt to address the symbolic context and initial purposes of the Wall. The article aims to build upon the functional explanations that have dominated much discussion, including concepts of the Wall having provided a fighting platform or line, or that it was primarily an impediment to movement with a 'customs' function. These explanations all have relevance.

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7 Hingley 2008, op. cit. (n. 3).


10 J.C. Bruce, *The Roman Wall: A Historical, Topographical and Descriptive account of the Barrier of the Lower Isthmus, extending from the Tyne to the Solway* (London 1851); G.H. Donaldson, 'Thoughts on a military appreciation of the design of Hadrian's Wall', *Archaeologia Aeliana* 16 (1988), 125–137; H.F. Pelham, *Essays on Roman History* (Oxford 1911); I.A. Richmond, *J. Collingwood Bruce’s Handbook to the Roman Wall* (Newcastle upon Tyne 1947, 10th ed.).


12 For impediment to movement, see E. Birley, 'Hadrianic frontier policy', in E. Swo-boda (ed.), *Carnuntina: Vorträge beim internationaler Kongress der Altertumsforscher*