



CultureCast: Talk

Ralph Jackson- The Face of an Emperor

Recorded at Segedunum Roman Fort, Bath & Museum on
15 April 2008

(Start of episode)

(Short introductory sound effect)

Male voiceover- CultureCast- the podcast from Tyne & Wear Museums.

(End of sound effect)

(Melodic ambient music plays for five seconds)

Ralph Jackson- My name is Ralph Jackson and I'm curator of Romano-British Collections at the British Museum. And so I am fortunate enough to have the head of Hadrian in the gallery most of the time. It's a wonderful opportunity for us to get the head out, normally the head is behind glass. And so it is actually very interesting to take it out, to install it somewhere, because each time you do this, you move it, you find out something you didn't know about it. So it's great fun to do it.

I want this to set the context for the head. You've looked at the head. I'm only going to show a single image (in the presentation) and you're looking at it now. I hope you'll forgive me for that. But the word 'picture' is sometimes better than the visual picture. I would say this (image) is the contrasting image of Hadrian to the one you see when you stand in front of the head. Indeed, if you then stood in front of that bronze I think you might question whether you were looking at the same thing. To my mind one of the tremendous things about this loan was the new photography which has really teased out of an object something completely different that we hadn't seen before. That is quite exciting.

When I was sitting in the hotel this morning, I saw a lot of bridges. So it seems appropriate to start and end with a bridge tonight. Indeed, it seems to be all bridges. Because the head was discovered when Old London Bridge was taken down following the building of New London bridge. Well, New London Bridge was built quite a long time ago so it wasn't that new! Old London Bridge, the one with the houses on, built in 1209 and lasted for 600 or so years. The only bridge that crosses the Thames until 1750, I think it is, when Westminster Bridge gets built. Clogged up with houses, difficult for traffic to pass, so in 1799 there's a competition for a new bridge across the River Thames. And (Thomas) Telford of course, is in there with his design. Telford's design is a single span, a single iron span across the whole

Thames. Well the boring old corporation, or whoever it was at that time, decided against that and they went for a traditional design by (John) Rennie which was a five-arched bridge. An elegant bridge, and you can still see it. It's in an Arizona location now. It's the one that the Americans bought. Now I was always told that the Americans bought it thinking it was the Tower Bridge- this is an urban myth. Well, so the guy who bought it says anyway!

(RJ laughs)

So the bridge is in America.

The find spot (of the head) was variously described. We confidently say on our website that the head was found in 1834- either 1834 or 1832. At all events, they couldn't take down Old London Bridge until the new one had been built. But when they took down the old bridge, they did some dredging as well- the old bridge has 20 arches, the new one had five arches. So it was obviously a completely different type of bridge. So they dredged to make the river work better. And in doing so, one of the things they fished up was the head- quite extraordinary. And it is variously described as coming either from, and this is a curious description, you've got a five arch bridge and it's said to come from the third arch. You'd have thought they'd say the central arch. So that's kind of disturbing. But the third arch, downstream. But the other provenance is given as the Southwark side, Old London Bridge. But the important thing, the key thing, never mind 1832 or 1834, it's pretty central in the river. Not only is it central in the river, but it lies pretty well on the line that Roman bridge took.

So we've got the head of Hadrian put into the river, near the centre of the river, along the line of the Roman bridge. Where did the Roman bridge lead to? It lead to the Forum Basilica of Roman London. Now it was rescued, you might say only just, because Charles Roach Smith in 'Antiquarian Roman London' didn't get his hands on it himself, his colleague John Newman did. Roach Smith says (in his book)-

"The beautiful head of the statue of Roman Emperor Hadrian, dredged up from the bed of the Thames, a little below Old London Bridge on the Southwark side of the river, was saved from the melting pot".

And that is a frightening thought. So it's rested all that time in the silt of the Thames, only possibly to have been melted down. So it wasn't melted down, it survived.

It is an extraordinary head, it's one and a quarter life size. It's a monumental head, it shows Hadrian in quite a youthful guise, I would say. (Mortimer) Wheeler in 1928 has this wonderful phrase. He says-

“The truth of the matter is that work belongs to the era *par excellence* of academic refinement in art. The era in which smooth and generalised form was correct and it was indecorous to be over 30.”

So we take his point- Hadrian is shown as, maybe, that sort of age. But it's very unlikely that he would have been 30, because the obvious time for the head to arrive in London is in AD 122, shortly before Hadrian himself, when he would have been in his 40s. But Wheeler is absolutely right in saying that this is an impressive memorial of imperial domination. It's certainly the face that you've looked at downstairs when you stand square in front of it. It's that disciplined face of imperial domination.

Hadrian's biographer, we're talking about the Augustan histories, so some time down the line but using imperial papers. Hadrian's biographer describes Hadrian as-

“Tall of stature, elegant in appearance, hair curled up on a comb and he wore a full beard to cover up the natural blemishes on his face. Very strongly built, rode and walked a great deal and always kept himself in training by the use of arms and javelin”.

I mean in general, that is a fair description of the image that we see in front of us.

Where was the head made? It's always said to be not top flight. It's a beautiful piece of casting actually, a terrific piece of casting, but probably not from Rome. Probably from Gall. Jocelyn Toynbee favoured the Gallish provenance for it. The mechanism by which it might have arrived is quite interesting and Aryan, a friend of Hadrian's, his legate?? in Cappodocia, has interesting things to say about that. He's talking about an image of Hadrian at Trap???. He says-

“Your statue has been set up to. I like its attitude, it's pointing to the sea. Its execution however is unsatisfactory, it's poor as a portrait and poor as a work of art. Do send out a statue worthy to bear your name and modelled in the attitude I've just described, for the spot is most appropriate for a permanent memorial”.

So you can imagine that the governor of the province of Britain has to organise this, he knows that Hadrian will visit and therefore contact the workshop in Gall to get a suitable image of Hadrian sent out. Who we're looking at is literally the head of the Roman Empire- it is the head of Hadrian, the man who ruled the Roman world and the head encapsulates everything. So as a piece of metal it was something very important. It gets across I would say, maybe provincial workmanship but it gets across rather well the complex character that Hadrian was. Not just gay, but sort of a hardy disciplinarian and intellectual aesthete. These two things don't obviously go together.

When you look at the head full on, you see that disciplinarian. You see the power of the Empire. And then when you look in subtle lighting from the side you get a little more insight perhaps into the face of a man who was an intellectual and who as an aesthete.

So the content...when you've walked round it (the statue), you'll have seen that the hair is not particularly neatly done at the back. It's quite rudimentarily worked. The ears look very odd. Clearly this was done rapidly because the head was not meant to be seen from behind. So it stands in a niche. For long it's been suggested that this is not an equestrian statue. Hadrian is standing, he's a larger than life size plinth and his big ears might have looked quite so big when he was high up on that plinth.

So where might that (plinth) be? There are two possibilities. One is much more likely than the other. He could actually have been on the bridge itself and that's an intriguing possibility. But the most likely thing is that he was in a niche in the Forum Basilica complex of Roman London and that for some reason the head was smashed from the statue and taken down and put into the Thames and these things may not have happened at exactly the same time. It could be a Saxon raid or whatever. We will never know exactly what. But there are a number of episodes of repair and damage. You'll have noticed the little patches which were put in at the time of casting. The casting flaws that needed to be repaired. There are other areas of damage as well. So the demise is actually unreachable.

Jocelyn Toynbee wasn't in much doubt. She said-

"The destruction of the piece and the hurling of its head into the Thames is to be laid most reasonably at the door of Saxon raiders."

But it's very heavy. Now it actually takes quite a bit of doing to carry this thing any distance and why would you go to that trouble? The rest of the body

was probably melted down but it's possible that damage was caused, not likely to be iconoclasm because Hadrian was not that sort of emperor, but the damage was caused by somebody and that the pieces were perhaps rescued. The head was rescued and then maybe placed into the Thames in some sort of ritual way. The same time the head was found, there were a very large number of figurines, so there are all sorts of possibilities. All I will say is we shouldn't necessarily assume that it was chopped off and hurled into the Thames.

Well, it is very nice for the head to be brought up here. It is a treasure of the British Museum. It has become an icon of Roman Britain and has been permanently on display for close on two centuries at the British Museum, which is quite fascinating when you think that it probably wasn't on display for much longer than that in London's Basilica and Forum. And in its later life in the British Museum, this was the height of Empire and a resonant period for this great imperial image. And for a very long time it was a unique survival- a monumental bronze portrait of Hadrian. There are still only a very small number of bronzes.

I want now to quickly- I don't if I've used up my 20 minutes (presentation time) already. As you can see it's Lawrencian stream of consciousness type of presentation! You weren't told that in the programme- I wanted to quickly think about Hadrian as a man, as a character, his visit to Britain, the consequences of the visit and ending up at the Wall.

You'll know he was born in AD 76. By the age of 10 he'd lost his father, he becomes a ward of Trajan. Trajan let's it be known that he's going to adopt him in 107-8 AD but he has to wait for another 10 years before he's formally adopted. That's two days before Trajan??? dies. And there's a lot of doubt about this. There's rumour that Trajan didn't actually adopt him and this was organised by others.

So he has some difficulties to deal with. He's not necessarily a universally popular man. He's popular with the army but not necessarily with everyone else.

So what did he do? He did all those sorts of things you'd need to do to get people on your side. He aligned himself with the Emperor Augustus. It was very interesting. For example he resumed the policy of the early emperors devoting his attention to maintaining peace throughout the world. This was very much an Augustus sort of thing. And then again he refused the title of Father of his country offered to him at the time of his accession and again later on.

Giving us the reason that Augustus had not won it until later in life. So all that is going on and at the same time as paying people, frankly, in order to check the rumours about himself he gave in person a double largesse to the people. He's already paid the army in the same way. He established a regular imperial post in order to relieve the local officials of such a burden. Very important, because when comes to Britain he's probably reliant on the imperial post to organise his retinue. But in saving the locals the cost of that, that obviously ingratiated himself at a number of different levels. And in the provinces he omitted large amounts of areas. And the I like the last thing on the list which is always guaranteed to curry favour. He gave gladiatorial combats for six days in succession, and on his birthday he put into the arena 1,000 wild beasts- so how could he fail?!

At this time, this is a time when he also has jettisoned all of Trajan's newly won provinces so he had some work to do.

At AD 121 he travelled to the provinces of Gall and came to the relief of all the communities with various acts of generosity. From there he went over into Germany and kept the soldiers in training, just as if war were imminent. He inspired them by proofs of his own powers of endurance, and actually led a soldier's life among the maniples and cheerfully are out of doors, such camp fare as bacon, cheese and vinegar. And he reestablished the discipline of the camps. He regulated the duties and expenses of the soldiers and now no-one could get a leave of absence from camp by unfair means. These things have interesting connections with of course, the Vindolanda Tablets where we know exactly the trouble they had to go to to get leave of absence. He visited the sick soldiers in their quarters. I mean, some of these things are standard things said about emperors and so this is always the difficult in picking out the real Hadrian from the standard descriptions that are given in the biographies. But he made a point to be acquainted with the soldiers and to know their numbers and this we can believe. He took a great interest in this. And so, having reformed the army, quite in the manner of a monarch, he set out for Britain. And there, he corrected many abuses, and was the first to construct a wall 80 miles in length which was to separate the Barbarians from the Romans. He removed from office Septicius Clarus, the prefect of the guard, and Suetonius Tranquillus, the imperial secretary, and many others besides. Because without his consent they'd been conducting themselves towards his wife Sabina, in a more informal fashion than the etiquette of the court demanded. And as he himself was wont to say, he would have sent away his wife too on the ground of ill temper and irritability had he been merely a private citizen. So this is the sort of frictions, if you like, that are present when he comes over to Britain.

But he makes his way up through Britain to the North. When he does that, it's interesting to think about this visit to Britain, because Hadrian is coming, he's crossing ocean, he's going to the very periphery of Empire, to a place that is actually still almost mythical to some of the people in the Roman Empire. It's an astonishing thing for an emperor to do. And also, it's only 79 years after the invasion of Britain. 79 years! I mean, there must have been the odd person around who can remember Britain before the Romans came. And an even shorter time since the Boudiccan revolt. So, we have to imagine that and actually that a few generations is not very long given the difficulties in Britain, the fighting in Britain, for Britain to have taken a truly Roman shape.

There were very large areas that were purely military. If you strip away all of the military stuff from Roman Britain, then you are left with comparatively little. So that is the Britain that this entourage moves through. A great entourage- doctors, and musicians and all sorts following Hadrian.

The consequences of the visit, I must be quick here because I can tell your eyes are glazing over, not unreasonably, and you want to go down and look at the head again, but the consequences of the visit- discipline. He brought discipline, to both civilian and military spheres. And all the way through, we keep hearing about Hadrian who's taking procurators and even governors to task for abuses of their powers. Very interesting to read that and we can believe that he did do those things. At the same the same time he was encouraging those civic projects and we have, it's the often cited example of, but the great inscription that goes up in the forum in Wroxeter only half a dozen years after Hadrian has gone. I mean, they take a little while to build.

"For the Emperor Caesar, Trajan, Hadrian, Augustus. Son of the deified Trajan. Conqueror of Parthea. Grandson of the deified Nerva. Pontifex Maximus in the 14th Year of tribunitian power. Thrice consul, Father of his country".

The civitas of the Cornovians erected this. So he has got local people, local bigwigs to get together money to encourage them to complete their Forum Basilica complex.

At the same time, he is doing military things and there are a couple of pieces I just want to draw into the frame, if you like.

Diplomas- Roman diplomas. These are things often called discharge certificates. They look, many of you will know what they look like, I've got a paper copy here-

(RJ shows paper copy of a Roman diploma to the audience)

Two bronze plates, hinged together like that. That's the actual size. And this is a very interesting one which I'll come back to shortly. First of all, the one from Stannington in Yorkshire, 16th September AD 124. Two years after Hadrian had gone. And it reads-

"The Emperor Caesar Trajan Augustus, son of the deified Trajan, conqueror of Parthea" sorry about all this...you've heard it before, we'll skip that bit.

"8th year of tribunitian power, three times consul, pro consul has granted to the cavalrymen and infantrymen who served in six ??? and 21 cohorts called-

And he then lists those.

"Which are in Britain under Platorius Nepos"- this is the governor who Hadrian brings over to Britain with him in his entourage- "with the sixth legion from Lower Germany, who have served 25 or more years and have been honourably discharged, whose names are written below, citizenship for themselves, their children and descendants and the right of legal marriage with the wives they had when citizenship was granted to them. Or if any were unmarried, with those they later marry but only a single one each".

So this is an important document issued to a guy whose name is Missing Son of Albanus of the Sunuki, ex-infantryman of this cohort. And this is a document that, the main record is in Rome. It's a copy of a very important document. And the one I showed you paper copy of, which is at the British Museum- you can see it on display at the Greek and Roman Life room- is somebody who was discharged on the 17th of July AD 122. In other words, the year and the time when Hadrian was over in the province of Britain. And it's not impossible that Hadrian might even have witnessed this. These discharges in his name.

The one (diploma) from Brigetia, where it was found, it's Pannonia, it's Hungary. Pannonia, Hadrian had links with that province. Issued to a chap called Gimmelus, who was an NCO of a cavalry regiment Panonian horse. And the interesting thing about the document is it lists 50 units serving in Britain and this is likely almost the complete auxiliary compliment in Britain at that time. So it's a very important document.

Well. Gimmelus, was a part of the Pannonian horse regiment goes back to Pannonia. That's why it's found at Brigetia. There's a fragment from north Britain of what appears to be a duplicate, it's just come up very recently. And this is a guy who clearly was retired and stayed in Britain. But both of these people are likely to have been around and inspected perhaps by Hadrian. And Hadrian's interest in all things military, and especially in the way that the units operated, is very clearly given in an inscription of about six years later, AD 128, from North Africa. This is the famous Adlocutio from Lambesis. And it's inscribed, the inscription survives, and we have this tremendous, it really brings home the man himself.

"He congratulated the legionary cavalry on their display. Military exercises have, I may say, their own rules and if anything is added or taken away from these rules the exercise either becomes of little value or too difficult. The more elaborateness is added, the poorer a show it makes. But you performed the most difficult of all exercises, namely javelin throwing clad in queras. In addition, I congratulate you on your spirit".

He goes on to talk then about, that's the cavalry and the legionary unit, one of the mixed units of cavalry and infantry. And what he says is that

"It's difficult for the cavalry of these mixed units to make a good impression by themselves and still harder not for them not to give dissatisfaction after the exercise of the auxiliary cavalry. The beauty of their horses and the elegance of their equipment is in keeping with the level of their pay".

He then reserves until last his praise for the Ala One Panoniorum. That's a large cavalry unit. And he says-

"You did everything in orderly fashion, you filled the field with manouvres, your javelin hurling was not without grace, although you used javelins which are short and stiff. Several of you hurled your lances equally well and your mounting was smart. Just as now and lively yesterday. If there were anything lacking, I should notice it. If there were anything conspicuously bad I should point it out. But you pleased me uniformly throughout the whole exercise. Your prefect evidently looks after you carefully. I bestow upon you a largesse."

So this was something clearly quite dramatic and fantastic. And because it's an inscription, not written history, we can be fairly sure you wouldn't get an

inscription put up if it was actually not what Hadrian wanted to appear as what he said. So we can kind of believe it.

Britain was famous for cavalry and I'll just briefly read part of a tombstone of a guy called Serranus. And again, he's a cavalryman from a mixed unit. And he's quite a boastful man actually, but he has reason to boast I think. His tombstone records-

"I am the man who, once very well known to the banks in Panonia" - another Panonian- "brave and foremost among 1,000 Botavians, was able with Hadrian as my judge to swim the wide waters of the deep Danube in full battle kit".

That's quite interesting that he call up Hadrian as his judge. Whether Hadrian was his judge or not. And it's that idea that Hadrian is actually close to the military.

So I will just finish by saying that Hadrian was said not to give his name to too many buildings but he did give his name to various things. Those of you who've been to South Shields recently, will have seen the thing called the Staffordshire Moorlands Pan. Which is a beautifully-enamelled bronze vessel with inscriptions naming Hadrian to all forts. The counter part to the Rudge Cup- a so-called Rudge Cup- and the Amial Skillet. The difference with the Staffordshire Moorlands Pan is that it has this interesting addition to the names of the forts. The inscription Regore Valli Elli Drachonus. And there's a strong argument for regarding this as the first time, the first record, of Hadrian's Wall actually being called that. So that along the line of Regore, Valli Elli- the wall of Hadrian.

So Hadrian named perhaps as the originator of the wall. And I did say we'd finish with another bridge. Well of course, Pons Aellius- Newcastle. Only one other Pons Aellius known and that is Hadrian's ultimate bridge, I suppose you would say because it's the bridge in Rome that leads from one bank to the other of the Tiber, that goes straight over to his great mausoleum. The Castel Sant Angelo.

And I'll let you off there.

(Audience clapping)

(Short sound effect)

Male voiceover- CultureCast- the podcast from Tyne & Wear Museums.

(End of sound effect)

(Melodic ambient music plays for five seconds)

END OF EPISODE.