

Anthony R. Birley

1937-2020

by

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Tony Birley as a participant in a discussion at a congress in Cologne: The administration in the Roman Empire, January 2005

Tony Birley died in a Newcastle hospital on 19 December 2020 after a life of great accomplishments. He was born on 8 October 1937 in Chesterholm, Northumberland, the ancient auxiliary fort of Vindolanda, just 34 miles to the west. His father Eric had bought the house where the Vindolanda Museum now is. Tony grew up there together with his older brother Robin. That ancient place shaped both their lives, albeit in different ways. His bond with the history of Rome and its provinces went back to his childhood.

At Clifton College in Bristol, where his father had been educated decades earlier, Tony's interest in and talent for the classical languages became apparent at an early age, and he absorbed them with an energy and depth almost unimaginable today. Anyone who came into contact with him later felt the self-evident familiarity with which he approached the life of the

ancient world. Tony then went up to Oxford, where he studied Classics from 1956 onwards, in the years 1960-1962 as a Craven Fellow; during that time, he not only completed his MA, but was also able to study for several months in Paris with Hans-Georg Pflaum at the École des Hautes Études. Pflaum had been in close contact with Tony's father Eric since the end of the Second World War, just like Sir Ronald Syme. All three were bound by many common interests, including their efforts to revive the *Prosopographia Imperii Romani* at the Berlin Academy in 1952. With this family and intellectual background, the topic Tony worked on in his dissertation (begun in 1963), was not such a surprise: 'The Roman High Command from the Death of Hadrian to the Death of Caracalla, with Particular Attention to the Danubian Wars of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus'. His supervisor was Ronald Syme, with whom he retained a very close connection throughout his life. In the edition of Syme's letters from 1930-1939 (see below), Birley wrote retrospectively: 'I had the good fortune to have known Syme from my early years, as he was a friend of my father'.

After holding positions at Birmingham and Leeds and a visiting professorship at Duke University in North Carolina, he was appointed Professor of Ancient History at Manchester University (1974-1990). He was later appointed to the Ancient History Chair at the Heinrich Heine University in Düsseldorf, succeeding Dietmar Kienast (1990-2002). After his retirement he was Visiting Professor at Newcastle and Durham. His integration into the German academic world was made much easier by his longstanding and close connection with several colleagues, such as the archaeologist and director of the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Bonn, Harald von Petrokovits, an old friend of his father's, Géza Alföldy, who worked first in Bonn and Bochum and later in Heidelberg, and Johannes Straub, the ancient historian in Bonn, in whose *Historia Augusta* colloquia Tony took part early on. I myself met him at the FIEC Congress in Bonn in 1969.

The centre of his scholarly life, however, always remained Britain, not least because of his early involvement in the excavations at Vindolanda, which were led by his brother Robin. When a large number of wooden tablets began to be discovered inside the Roman auxiliary fort, shedding light on the lives of its military and civilian inhabitants, he was interested from the outset in deciphering and interpreting them, and in what they could reveal about Roman life in Britain. He had dealt with the Roman province of Britannia in its many aspects at an early stage of his career, not least in a book for the general public, first published as early as 1964: *Life in Roman Britain*, a subject which he later continued with *The People of Roman Britain* (1979) and *Garrison Life at Vindolanda. A Band of Brothers* (2002), with partly different aims.

In his dissertation, Britain had only played a minor role. But the topic of the Roman High Command from the death of Hadrian to the death of Caracalla gave rise to several monograph projects, which soon made him known beyond the narrow circle of his peers. This was especially the case with the biography of the Roman emperor who had played a central role in the dissertation: *Marcus Aurelius*. First published in 1966 (second edition in 1987), the work was translated into German as early as in 1968, and later into Italian and Spanish. The fascinating thing about his portrayal was that he placed the emperor in the broadly presented Roman ruling class, not showing him as the lonely ruler, but as part of the elite with whom and through whom the empire was governed. Birley achieved this through his profound knowledge of imperial prosopography, expertly putting to fruition what his father Eric, Ronald Syme and Hans-Georg Pflaum, among others, had worked out. By carefully combining the rich epigraphic and numismatic evidence with the relatively many literary sources of the period, an in-depth picture of a time of transition emerged, with an emperor who could appear so different from

many of his predecessors and his successors. This first impressive biography of the emperor was followed by Septimius Severus in 1971 and finally Hadrian in 1997: *Hadrian. The Restless Emperor*. In a unique synthesis of all the sources, not only the prosopographical ones, a vivid picture of such a distinctive and complicated ruler emerges, along with a fascinating portrait of the ruling class of the empire since Trajan's reign, including the intellectuals who came into contact with Hadrian. It is also remarkable how Birley includes the *Vita* of Hadrian in the *Historia Augusta* in his account of Hadrian's figure: something that he managed to achieve on the basis of his decades of engagement with this important yet problematic work.



Tony Birley during his lecture at the congress in Cologne, January 2005

In all these works, the province of Britannia was represented in one form or another, especially since the island had the largest army contingent in the whole empire since the time of Hadrian and its supreme commander, the governor, had a proportionate weight. But the province of Britannia only became the focus of Birley's scholarly work with the more detailed analysis of the governors, as well as the other high officials who worked there. This seemed urgently necessary simply because the senatorial and equestrian officeholders of this province, despite their extraordinary importance in the overall fabric of the empire, had not yet received any special study, in contrast to many other regions that were not comparable to the importance of Britannia. Birley had already presented a first very brief attempt in 1967 in the fourth volume of *Epigraphische Studien* in just under 40 pages: *The Roman Governors of Britain*. But the extensive, masterly treatment followed only in 1981 under the title *The Fasti of Roman Britain*. In contrast to all other discussions of the governors (and other officials) of a province, Birley did not limit himself to the first three centuries (pp. 37-309), but included all those who were active there after Diocletian's reform (pp. 309-353). Nevertheless, the period from AD 43 to the first Tetrarchy dominated the study, simply because of the nature of the evidence base. This was also evident in the special examination and description of the senatorial career which precedes the actual prosopographical analysis. In just under 32 pages, based on works on the senatorial *cursus honorum* that had appeared in German in the years before, he succeeds in

presenting a secure, balanced description of the many aspects that no one else had worked out so masterfully and comprehensively for the entire three centuries. Many subsequent works could be based on this as a secure foundation. But Birley turned again to the officeholders of this province after almost a quarter of a century, this time under the title *The Roman Government of Britain* (2005). Although he refrained from producing a new analysis of the *cursus honorum*, he included the same group of people as in the 1981 work; wherever possible, he gave considerably more weight to all that was carried out by the individuals. In many respects the prosopographical discussions of the individuals almost give rise to something approaching a new account of the history of the province as a whole, which goes far beyond the individual histories of the various officeholders. One of these governors, Cn. Iulius Agricola, who took up a great deal of space in both books, separately received his fair share of interest, not surprisingly, in a series of articles, but above all in a translation and extensive commentary on the biography by Tacitus, together with the *Germania*.

This steady stream of monographs effectively gives the measure of Tony Birley's scholarship. Yet he has also published a large number of articles in journals, anthologies and Festschriften, which reveal the extent of his learning, starting with studies of individual new documents from Vindolanda, on individual emperors, especially Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius, on the problems of the Roman external borders, especially in the north of the island, on the *Historia Augusta* and Marius Maximus, and on individual deities of the Roman world, mostly embedded in daily life in Britain. They are a treasure trove for any student of the Roman Empire, but cannot be fairly summarised in a few lines; yet they have particular weight to the analysis of his life as a scholar of the imperial period.

Along with his great work as an historian who could produce authoritative accounts and insightful analysis, a further achievement is worth mentioning, both because of its distinctive importance and for the spirit with which Birley took it upon himself: his work as an editor of the many contributions of his most influential teacher, Sir Ronald Syme. The first two volumes of the *Roman Papers* were published in 1979, but the wealth of these complex, mostly prosopographical articles was difficult to access and make proper use of without an index. Things changed radically when Birley took over the editing of the subsequent volumes, from *Roman Papers* III in 1984 to *Roman Papers* VI-VII in 1991, two years after Syme's death. Volume III contained the index to the first three volumes, and the following ones were equipped with their own sets. Those who had often dealt with Syme's immense oeuvre readily realise what a gift Birley had made to the scholarly world. It was a comprehensive and time-consuming work, which he carried out to the point of self-denial. But other tasks were to follow.

Fergus Millar, who was Syme's literary executor, asked Birley to take care of almost all the manuscripts that Syme had partially written in the 1930s and during the Second World War, but had never published. He also took on this task: *Anatolica. Studies in Strabo* (1995) and *The Provincial at Rome and Rome and the Balkans 80 BC-AD 14* (1999) were the results. In the process, Birley added literature where possible and supplemented both works with later shorter manuscripts by Syme that had not yet been published. In the course of this time-consuming work, he also came across numerous letters written to Syme by other scholars, including Münzer and Stein, whom Syme held in high esteem as masters of prosopographical work, as well as many other scholars with whom Syme had corresponded. Birley deciphered all these handwritten texts and published them in April 2020 as his final tribute to this outstanding figure: *Select Correspondence of Ronald Syme, 1927-1939*

(<https://www.hcsjournal.org/ojs/index.php/hcs/article/view/SV01>), with a very personal introduction that reveals deep insights into Syme's personality and work.

This deeply generous work on the towering figure that Syme was, however, reveals a characteristic trait that distinguished Tony's personality: his openness to others, young and old alike, and his willingness to share as what he knew and mastered with others, in countless letters and in electronic form. Many have experienced his helpfulness, myself on many occasions; I will never forget how brilliantly he translated into English my lecture to the colloquium on the occasion of Ronald Syme's 80th birthday (*Caesar Augustus: Seven Aspects*). Both his importance as a historian of imperial Rome and his open and unfailingly friendly personality left a deep impression on all those with whom he interacted. This is how he will be remembered.

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