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Book Reviews



PRESENTING THE ROMANS: INTERPRETING THE FRONTIERS OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE WORLD HERITAGE SITE. Edited by Nigel Mills. Pp. xiii and 204, Illus 59. The Boydell Press (Heritage Matters Series, **12**), 2013. Price: £60.00. ISBN 978 184383 847 0.

Peter Stone's preface opens this volume with the hard-hitting assessment that the Romans are seen as 'boring' and 'a hated topic': where, he asks, 'have we...gone so badly wrong?' (p. xiii). By way of an answer, nineteen chapters, penned by twenty-seven specialists, explore and evaluate past, present, and future approaches to disseminating Roman frontier research to a mass audience. The result makes important reading for heritage professionals.

Appropriately for a book whose origins lie in a marathon two-day session at the 2009 International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies, the contents include case studies from across Europe. Some contributors seem to eschew the bleak implications of the preface, with Kempkes, for instance, reporting that the multi-faceted site interpretation at Aalen, Germany, has 'achieved [its] objectives' (p. 53). This international perspective also illustrates how different research legacies can drive modern priorities. At *Vindonissa*, Switzerland, the amphitheatre was excavated in 1897 and then restored as a performance venue (Trumm and Flück). Today, site presentation has graduated to a less literal style, with the south fortress gate marked by a steel framework redolent of Gustave Eiffel's work. At *Viminacium*, Serbia, where nothing was visible in 2000, current work is — perhaps unknowingly — aping nineteenth-century *Vindonissa* by excavating the amphitheatre, prior to its restoration, as a performance space (Golubović and Korać).

A penchant for reconstructions, physical or virtual, full-size or miniature, transcends national boundaries. Kempkes argues that a 1:1 scale cavalry barrack erected at Aalen has a 'positive impact' (p. 52), while other contributors rehearse the controversies such full-size physical reconstructions attract. For instance, Flügel and Obmann argue that reconstructed gateways are often too short, while Mills agrees that authenticity is 'a constant concern to ensure that visitors are not misled' (p. 5). Young points out that UNESCO *Operational Guidelines* state 'Reconstruction is acceptable only on the basis of complete and detailed documentation and to no extent on conjecture' (p. 79), a benchmark no ruined Roman structure can attain.

Several contributions seek to move interpretation away from a focus on structures. It is repeatedly stressed that 'people are interested in people' and Mills believes this holds 'the best opportunities for engaging modern audiences' (p. 3). While potential certainly exists, the archaeological foundations for reconstructing individual lives in the frontier zones are

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generally even slighter than those for architecture, particularly where indigenous groups are concerned. On Hadrian's Wall, for example, poor bone preservation even robs us of the testimony of skeletons. Such limited visibility is ably demonstrated by a marked bias in this book's illustrations towards ancient structures rather than their inhabitants, emphasizing the care needed if reconstructed lives are to avoid being as misleading as flawed building reconstructions.

Quoted observations from members of the public are particularly enlightening. Belief that Aalen's *principia* is the entire fort, ignorance that Hadrian's Wall was a frontier, incomprehension of Housesteads' interior, and a preoccupation with parking, put specialist debate about precise Roman building heights into perspective. One focus-group participant, when asked what words or images Hadrian's Wall — arguably the second most famous archaeological monument in Britain — brought to mind, replied simply 'nothing' (p. 159). It is a response that should chill all archaeologists.

MATTHEW SYMONDS