# A History of the Congress of Roman Frontier Studies 1949-2022

A Retrospective to mark the 25th Congress in Nijmegen

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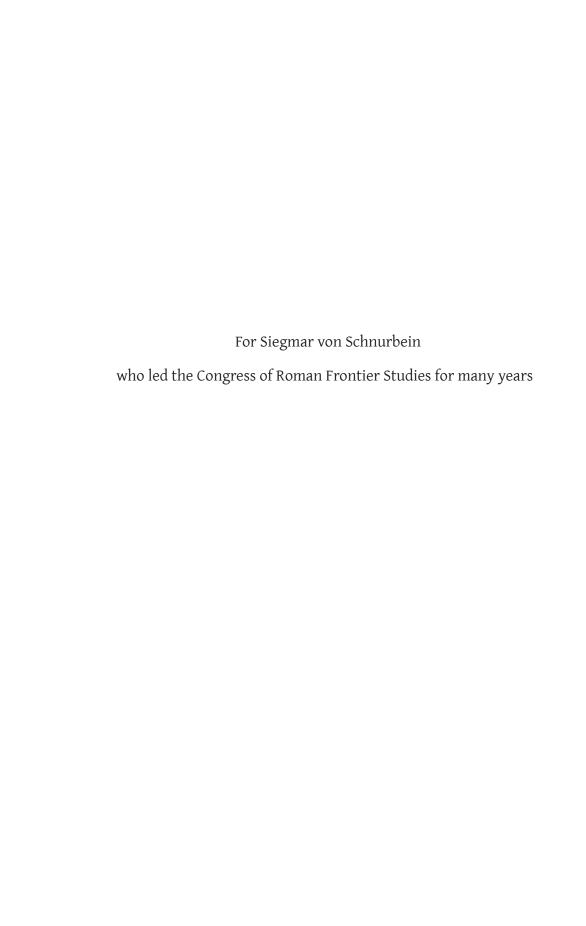
Cover images: The participants at the First Congress in 1949 and the Twenty-fourth Congress in 2018.

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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

#### A HISTORY OF THE CONGRESS OF ROMAN FRONTIER STUDIES 1949-2022

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

### 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

# The Sixth International Congress of Archaeology, Berlin 1939

In August 1939, around eight hundred participants from 34 nations joined the Sixth International Congress of Archaeology in Berlin. Among the scientists who met at the invitation of the Deutsches Archäelogisches Institut were Andreas Alföldy, Eric Birley, Howard Comfort, Hans Dragendorff and many other familiar names in Roman archaeology (Figure 3).

One of the six sessions held at that Congress was on 'Roman Antiquity II – The north and west'. In his opening speech, Rudolph Egger of Vienna set out the motives

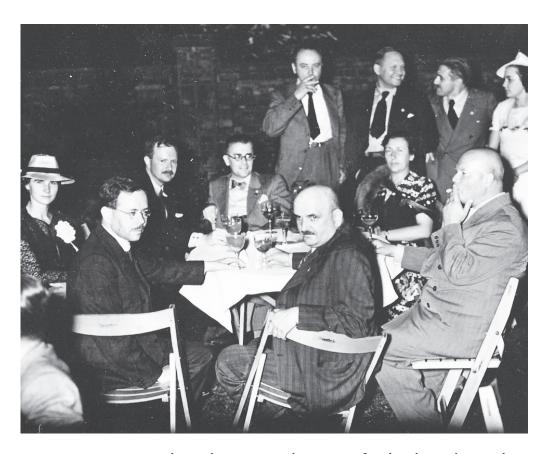


Figure 3. Participants at the Sixth International Congress of Archaeology relax in a beer garden in Berlin: Andreas Alföldi turning to his right with behind him and to the right seated Eric Birley and Howard Comfort with the bow tie

behind this special section: 'The reason is not due to external circumstances, e. g. the abundance of material, ... but to the close relations that connect the west of Europe and the Danube countries ... Emphasis should also be placed on ... the distinct independent existence of these provinces...', a confident statement at a time when 'archaeology' was seen as the archaeology of ancient Egypt and Greece.

Nineteen speakers introduced archaeological, historical and numismatic research from Algeria, Austria, Germany, Yugoslavia, Poland, Romania, Switzerland, Serbia, Hungary and the United Kingdom. Several of these were genuine frontier papers. They included Christoph Albrecht on Oberaden, Andreas Alföldi on the Sarmatians, Viktor Hoffiller on Sirmium, Louis Leschi on Lambaesis, Stefan Paulivics on Aquincum and Nicola Vulić on the Danube *limes*. Papers on Roman frontiers were given in other sessions, on Adamklissi, the Citadel in Jerusalem and the frontier system of Arabia and Palestine.

Surviving letters in the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut in Berlin demonstrate that since at least 1937 Eric Birley, Ian Richmond and Kurt Stade had been discussing the possibility of holding the First Congress of Roman Frontier Studies in Britain to follow the Pilgrimage of Hadrian's Wall in 1940 (RGK-A-0373 55a-b). Birley and Stade continued the discussions at the International Congress of Archaeology. But, given the timing of the Congress, August 1939, Eric Birley was there but briefly, having to leave it in a hurry, summoned back to Britain via a coded telegram purportedly sent by his wife but actually from Military Intelligence, who had recruited him three or four months earlier because of his excellent German and study of the Roman army. In his haste, he left his pyjamas behind. After the War they were returned to him by Frau Nesselhauf, washed and ironed.

#### Turning plans into reality

Needless to say, the Second World War prevented the holding of both the Congress and the Pilgrimage in 1940. But after the War had ended, the time was ripe for a specific Congress on the archaeological issues of the Roman border provinces. Birley resurrected the proposal with the intention of bringing together colleagues from across Europe, restoring international relations and rebuilding harmony between nations. Unfortunately, Kurt Stade could not attend because he was still a Prisoner of War in the Soviet Union.

The first International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies was held in Newcastle upon Tyne in July 1949 and timed to follow the Centenary Pilgrimage of Hadrian's Wall. It was a small gathering of about 40 archaeologists and historians (together with several spouses), but it included significant figures such as Andreas Alföldi and Mortimer Wheeler. Today, up to 400 people from 25 countries and all five continents come together in a province of the Roman Empire to discuss recent research into Roman frontier archaeology, artefacts, frontier social worlds, Roman military studies

and visit the frontier remains and museums in the area in which the Congress is being held (Figure 4).

The relationship between that Centenary Pilgrimage and the First Congress set the pattern for many future meetings in that the Pilgrimage served as a pre- or post-Congress tour in the ninth year of each decade thereby drawing the Congress back to Britain. This ran for five decades, but after 1989 it was decided to break the link and hold the Congress every three years; in 2009 the two patterns coincided again and the Congress returned to Newcastle, the location of that First Congress sixty years earlier. At many Congresses there has been a pre- and a post-Congress tour of sites

Year, Location	Participants	Lectures	Lectures published
1949, Newcastle (GB)	40	11	11
1955, Carnuntum (AT)	34	22	22
1957, Rheinfelden (CH)		21	20
1959, Durham (GB)	89	20	
1961, Celje (SL)	69	25	19
1964, Arnoldshain (DE)	100	27	27
1967, Tel Aviv (IL)		41	37
1969, Cardiff (GB)	103	32	32
1972, Mamaia (RO)	177	69	55
1974, Xanten/Nijmegen (DE/NL)	180	68	68
1976, Székesfehérvár (HU)	156	87	57
1979, Stirling (GB)	164	81	77
1983, Aalen (DE)	284	120	115
1986, Carnuntum (AT)	225	104	87
1989, Canterbury (GB)	190	102	100
1995, Rolduc (NL)	200	99	99
1997, Zalău (RO)	204	106	106
2000, Amman (JO)	250	150	100
2003, Pécs (HU)	240	150	99
2006, León (ES)	284	197	138
2009, Newcastle (GB)	350	180	105
2012, Ruse (BG)	300	204	127
2015, Ingolstadt (DE)	370	210	149
2018, Viminacium (RS)	360	260	140

Figure 4. Table of attendance at the Congresses. The figures in pink are unknown and those in yellow are unconfirmed

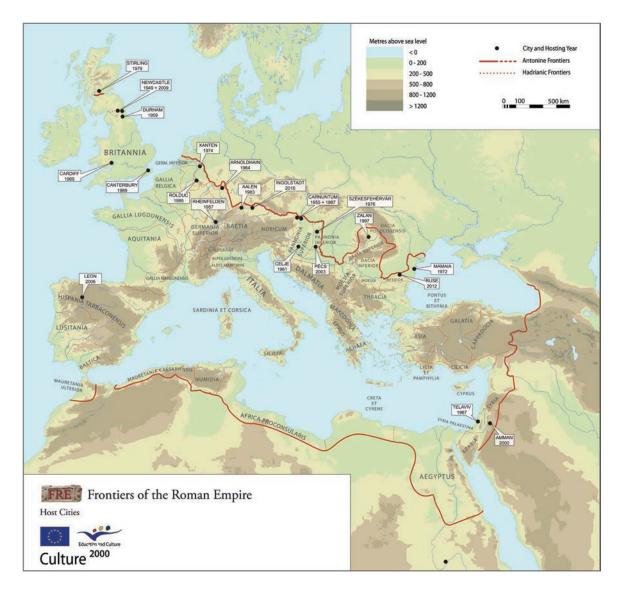


Figure 5. Map of the locations of the Congresses.

Newcastle, Durham, Cardiff, Stirling and Canterbury (UK); Carnuntum (Austria); Rheinfelden/Basel (Switzerland); Arnoldshain, Aalen and Ingolstadt (Germany); Tel Aviv (Israel); Mamaïa and Zalău (Romania); Székesfehérvár and Pécs (Hungary); Rolduc Abbey, Kerkrade (Netherlands) Amman (Jordan); León (Spain); Ruse (Bulgaria); and Viminacium (Serbia) with the Congresses often travelling around, such as the Xanten and Nijmegen Congress (Germany and Netherlands) and one in the former Yugoslavia (listed as Celje on the map).

and museums, normally lasting between one and three days, thereby extending the whole Congress experience up to a fortnight.

A distinct feature of the Congress since the first meeting has been the integration of lectures and site tours, the latter helping to ensure the convivial atmosphere which is the hallmark of the Congress. Over the last 73 years the Congress has travelled to 15 countries in Europe from the Atlantic to the Black Sea and two in the Middle East. In Roman terms, an equivalent number of provinces have been visited (Figure 5).

It is a matter of great regret that a full Congress has not been held in North Africa. In 1954, the exciting discoveries in North Africa beckoned but the death of the organiser Louis Leschi led to its cancellation. The unsettled international situation led a proposed Congress in Morocco in 2018 to be abandoned. The interests of the participants of the Congress has always extended to the lands beyond the frontier and the artefacts found there that had passed through Roman frontiers.

The Congress of Roman Frontier Studies is unusual in that it has no constitution, although a Code of Conduct has recently been issued. At each meeting, the location of the next Congress is decided at a plenary session and the baton passes from the organisers of that Congress to those who will prepare the next (though whenever possible Congresses are planned two ahead). Each Congress is organised by a local Committee but advised by an 'international committee' consisting of those archaeologists who have organised previous meetings. Continuity is also provided by the two chairs of the Congress, recently David Breeze and Siegmar von Schnurbein and now Rebecca Jones and Andreas Thiel. The local Committee take on the bulk of the organisation, and are responsible for seeing through the subsequent publication of their Acta, the proceedings of the Congress (Figure 6). It is incredible that two scholars who attended the First Congress in Newcastle in 1949 are still alive: Brenda Heywood (Figure 7) and Norman McCord. The reminiscences of those who attended the Congresses are an important part of our history and so we have invited some colleagues to offer their memories of a key meeting, often the First Congress they attended, although more were submitted and most included below.

This book considers each Congress in turn against the political background of the time. Essential information is provided at the beginning of each account with a bibliography of the Congress at the end. The first item is the proceedings of the Congress, followed by the guide for the Congress, when one was produced, and finally additional publications relating to the Congress. These include reviews, several of which contain critical comments not just on the publications but on the nature of the Congress itself.

The gathering of information on each Congress has not always been easy. In the early days, information on the organisation and organisers of the Congress was frequently not provided, and one report does not even have an editor cited. However,

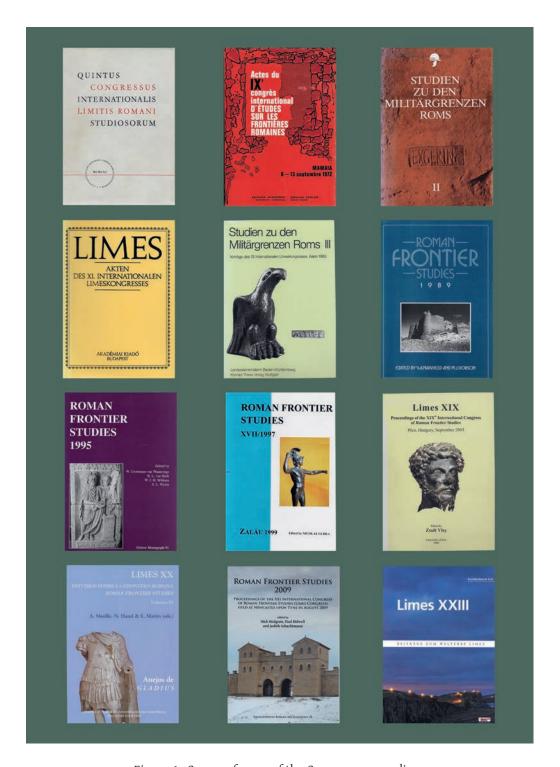


Figure 6. Covers of some of the Congress proceedings



Figure 7. Eric Birley with his wife Peggy and John Gillam (far left) and Brenda Swinbank (later Heywood, far right)

this gradually changed with the editor of the proceedings often providing not only an overview of the event (from 1989 onwards) but also a review of research on the frontiers in his/her country and comment on the impact of the visit of the Congress (starting in 2003). These are valuable accounts in their own right, but also provide useful information on the development of the conferences and therefore an aspect of the history of archaeology in the 20th century and into the 21st.