The Congress of Roman Frontier Studies

David Breeze examines the history of a gathering dedicated to Roman frontiers, which is approaching its 75th anniversary.

In August 1939, Eric Birley was in Berlin participating in the 6th International Congress of Archaeology. This was a particularly interesting conference because, for the first time, the programme had been extended to include Roman provincial archaeology. Hitherto, only Classical archaeology – that is, the study of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome – had been embraced. This was a significant step forward. It was not surprising, therefore, that Birley, together with his German colleague Kurt Stade, were planning to go even further and hold a Congress of Roman Frontier Studies. These discussions were prematurely halted by the receipt of a coded telegram purporting to come from Birley’s wife, but actually from the War Office, summoning him home to join Military Intelligence, to which he had previously been recruited owing to his fluent German and knowledge of the Roman army. Within days, he was in uniform and was to stay in uniform for the next six years.

The proposal in Berlin had been to hold the first Congress of Roman Frontier Studies in Britain as an adjunct to the decennial Pilgrimage of Hadrian’s Wall in 1940. War prevented both meetings being held. After the War, Birley returned to his earlier plan. He rearranged the 1940 Pilgrimage as the Centenary Pilgrimage in 1949, held exactly 100 years after the first in 1849, and attached to it the first meeting in Newcastle of the Congress.

One purpose of the meeting was to renew links between British and Continental scholars and rebuild international harmony. A sign of the times was Kurt Stade’s inability to attend this first Congress as he remained a prisoner of war in Russia. One participant was the 19-year-old Norman McCord. He still remembers the occasion. ‘I was not long out of school, still living at home in a North Shields house much damaged by bombing and with affectionate memories of close neighbours and friends as Blitz victims. I was – with many others – astonished to see Germans and Italians welcomed at that first Congress in the way they were. I feel pretty sure that the first Congress was a useful lesson to me in more than one respect!’ Birley had achieved his aim. It was not until the 1957 Congress, however, that all German POWs had returned home and were able to attend.

The Congress was buffeted by other international events in its early years. Austria hosted a meeting at Carnuntum in 1955, immediately after it was granted independent status, and the town vacated by Russian troops. Switzerland was a safe location in 1957. Two years later, the Congress returned to Britain to link up with the Pilgrimage. In 1961, it travelled to Yugoslavia, then seeking to demonstrate its independence from Russia and flexing its muscles on the world stage. In 1964, it became possible to hold a Congress in Germany, at Arnoldshain near Frankfurt. Tel Aviv followed in...
1967, the first of only two occasions when meetings have been held outside Europe. It was not until 2000 that the Congress was held in an Arab country: Jordan. In 2018, the Congress met beside the Danube in the midst of a mass migration into Germany, making a conference about barriers somewhat topical.

The 1969 Congress was held in Cardiff, and the event soon fell into the three-year pattern continued to this day; in 1989 the link with the Pilgrimage of Hadrian’s Wall was broken. The Congress criss-crossed Europe, usually alternating between East and West: 1972 Romania, 1974 Germany, 1976 Hungary, 1979 Scotland; 1983 Aalen in Germany, 1986 Carnuntum again, 1989 the Saxon Shore. Then there was a break, as it was not possible to hold the planned Congress in Yugoslavia in 1993. The next was 1995 in the Netherlands, then 1997 Romania, 2000 Jordan, 2003 Hungary, 2006 Spain, 2009 Newcastle in the UK, 60 years after the first meeting there. In 2012 it was Bulgaria for the first time, 2015 Bavaria, and 2018 Serbia. The 25th Congress of Roman Frontier Studies will be held in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, in August this year.

**A forum for frontiers**

The Congress has come a long way since its small beginnings in 1949. There were about 40 participants on that occasion, several accompanied by their partners. There were 11 speakers, only one a woman: Anne Robertson from Glasgow, who spoke about the Antonine Wall. Already, however, the meeting attracted participants from beyond Europe, most notably Colonel Jean Baradez from Algeria, still part of France until its independence in 1962, bearing the first copies of his magnum opus on the Roman frontier in that country: *Fossatum Africæ*. The range of papers set the pattern for the years to come, with a mixture of local investigations and overarching reviews. The most-famous paper in 1949 was undoubtedly Andreas Alföldi’s ‘The moral barrier on Rhine and Danube’. Alföldi knew what he was talking about because he had recently left Communist Hungary for the more congenial atmosphere of Switzerland.

The number of participants grew steadily with each meeting. The peak was reached in 2018, when the Congress was held in Ingolstadt (where Mary Shelley imagined Dr Frankenstein conducted his experiments): 370 scholars from 30 countries gathered there. However, Nijmegen looks to equal if not pass that total. In all these years, there has been only one failure to publish the Congress proceedings. Indeed, these volumes have grown steadily larger, reflecting the number of lectures, with three volumes produced after the 1979 Congress in Stirling.

The Congress has always had its own particular framework: days of lectures interspersed with visits to the local Roman frontier and military sites, led by the local specialists. They are therefore a wonderful method of exploring the periphery of the Roman Empire. The success of the Congress in terms of the number of participants has led to the necessity for as many as four concurrent lecture sessions, leading to agonising choices. And, of course, everyone wants to talk about their own excavation. This inevitably led to the lectures often being arranged in geographical sessions, each including many excavation reports. Various experiments were explored to break away from this pattern, leading to the creation of thematic sessions. The first was held in Carnuntum in 1986, and at Ruse in Bulgaria in 2012 the whole lecture programme was organised into thematic sessions.

Lectures and site visits are important, but perhaps the greatest importance of each Congress of Roman Frontier Studies is networking. Here, old and young, experienced scholars and tyros meet as equals, or as close as possible to that. I still remember on my first Congress in 1969 being approached by the eminent Dutch scholar Jules Bogaers to discuss a paper I had just published, and being encouraged to pursue my research into fort plans by the equally eminent Hans Schönberger when my lecture did not meet with the approval of several members of the audience. Today, the Congress is noted for its relaxed atmosphere and conviviality, both of which encourage profitable discussion. There is no doubt that the 25th Congress at Nijmegen will follow this tradition and Roman frontier studies will profit from it.