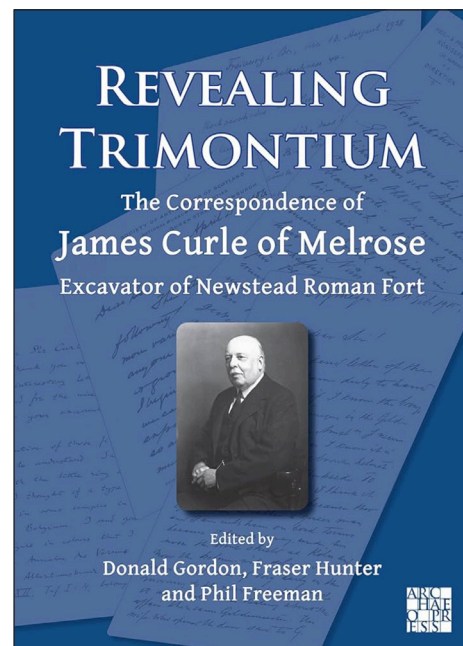


Book Review

Gordon, Donald, Fraser Hunter and Phil Freeman (eds). 2023. *Revealing Trimontium: The Correspondence of James Curle of Melrose, Excavator of Newstead Roman Fort*. Oxford: Archaeopress; 978-1-8032-7515-4 paperback £35.

Although a notable figure in Roman frontier archaeology up until the Second World War, James Curle (1862–1944) has since faded from view outside the context of Roman military studies, where his fieldwork remains better known. From 1905 to 1910 he excavated at the site of the Roman fort just to the east of his native Melrose, a town in the Scottish Borders in the lee of the ‘three hills’ which gave Trimontium (modern Newstead) its name. With exemplary speed, Curle (1911) then published his findings in a large and lavishly illustrated volume, long considered the gold standard in excavation reporting: ‘still the finest volume on any Roman excavation ever produced’ according to archaeologist Eric Birley (1906–1995), nearly 80 years later.

Birley knew Curle personally, welcoming him and his wife as visitors to his own excavations at Vindolanda before the War. He viewed Curle as a significant background figure to the investigation of Hadrian’s Wall in the 1920s, and valued his encouragement of younger archaeologists to focus on the evidence of the imported Roman pottery being excavated at Corbridge and other sites of the Wall. Birley also appreciated the quality of



Curle's intellect and scholarship at a time when archaeology had been predominantly an amateur pursuit. He recalled that the first time he visited the museum at Vindonissa (Switzerland) in 1929, looking for parallel examples of pottery from the excavation of Birdoswald on Hadrian's Wall, the curator remembered Curle doing the same with the Newstead material. The former apparently commented that because Curle was so learned, and his German so good, he assumed he must be a university professor rather than the landed gentleman and writer to the Signet (i.e. a solicitor in Scotland) Birley knew him to be.

The book under review, part of Archaeopress's eclectic *Archaeological Lives* series, is itself a handsome volume, packed with high quality reproductions of portraits, plans and photographs of prize exhibits from Curle's excavation. It provides a window onto an Edwardian gentleman's archaeological world via a selection of his correspondence, revealing the 'knowledge network' (cf. Roberts and Sheppard 2020) of intellectual contacts at home and abroad on which Curle's research built.

Chapters 2–7 present a series of useful introductory essays written by different members of the editorial team. Chapter 2 briefly presents the social and intellectual context of Curle and his work, including a list of his travels abroad (clearly presented in table form), and directs the reader towards previous publications. Chapter 3 is an introduction to the site. Chapter 4 considers Curle's broader antiquarian interests, and his network-building in greater detail, including a table of correspondents divided by geographical location. Chapter 5 describes his relationship with Haverfield, the leading British Romanist of his day, and suggests why Curle's archaeological work deserves to be more widely appreciated. Chapter 6 is a portrait of Curle as a leading citizen of Melrose. Chapter 7 then reverts to the theme of his wider network, providing potted biographies of the main *dramatis* (or *epistularum?*) *personae*.

The bulk of the book, however, consists of more than 150 items of correspondence divided into four groups, each occupying a separate chapter: with staff in the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum (Chapter 8); with staff in a different section of the British Museum, the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities (Chapter 9); with Professor Francis Haverfield and Sir George Macdonald (Chapter 10); and with a wider circle of scholarly connections both within the UK and throughout continental Europe (Chapter 11). This part of the book concludes with a shorter chapter of 'Miscellanea' designed to be a representative of Curle's antiquarian activity before he became 'the Excavator of Newstead', and in the last years of his life. A particularly pleasing feature is the inclusion, alongside the relevant portions of text, of re-drawings of the sketches with which Curle frequently illustrated his letters, showing his engagement with his material and his keenness to tap into his contacts' expertise.

The correspondence with Haverfield, and with Read and Smith at the British Museum, has been published by the Trimontium Trust before (Gordon 2005; 2008), but is republished here with more detailed critical apparatus, and the benefit of the introductory essays. A collection of letters between the British Museum and Curle's younger brother, the archaeologist Alexander (A.O.) Curle is also included as an Appendix.

Perhaps inevitably, given the co-operative nature of the project, there is a certain amount of duplication or repetition in the introductory chapters. It is also possible that the substance of Chapter 6 ('James Curle: A Man of Melrose') could have been incorporated with Chapter 2, or positioned earlier, at least. The photographs in Chapter 6 are wonderful, nevertheless, and are tempting the reviewer to speed to Melrose on a reverse-pilgrimage from Durham at the first opportunity! The letters are beautifully edited and presented, and the book as a whole is well-organized and easy to use.

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