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Catherine Teitz

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Roman Frontier Research Networks between Britain and Germany,
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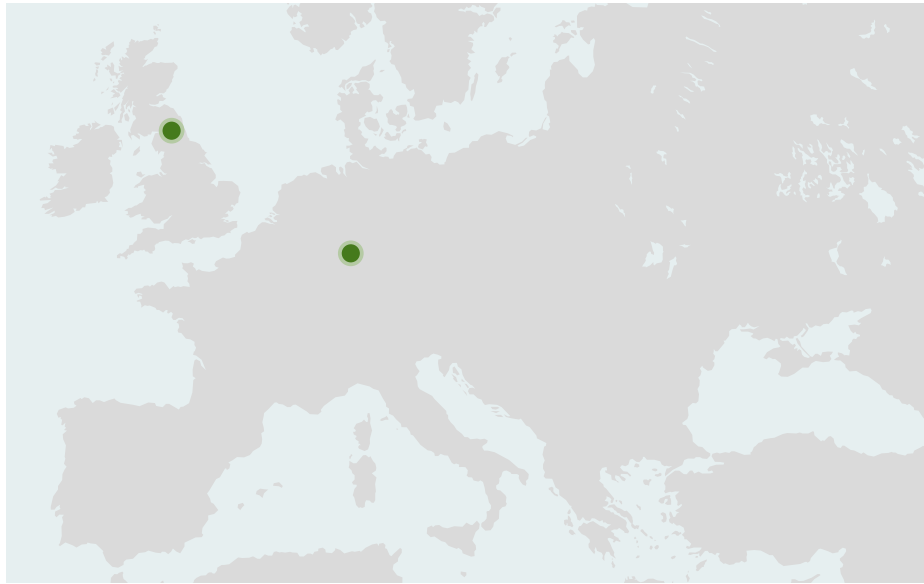
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Vindolanda, UK/ Frankfurt, Germany

Eric Birley and the RGK. Roman Frontier Research Networks between Britain and Germany, 1929–1959

Research Conducted September to December 2023

CATHERINE TEITZ

Romano-Germanic Commission of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI)

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HEAD OF PROJECT

C. Teitz

ABSTRACT

Eric Birley was a notable British scholar of Roman frontier studies in the middle of the 20th century. Birley worked closely with German scholars, particularly at the Römisch-Germanische Kommission (RGK), before Second World War and resumed collaboration shortly after. Using archives at the Vindolanda Trust and the RGK, this project has traced Birley's academic networks and his relationship to Germany to study his influence on the growth of Roman frontier studies as a sub-discipline after the war.

KEYWORDS

Birley, Roman frontier research, Vindolanda, RGK, archive, intellectual network

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Eric Birley war Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts ein bedeutender britischer Professor für die Erforschung der Grenzen des Römischen Reiches. Vor dem Zweiten Weltkrieg arbeitete Birley eng mit deutschen Wissenschaftler:innen zusammen, insbesondere von der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission (RGK). Kurz nach dem Krieg nahm

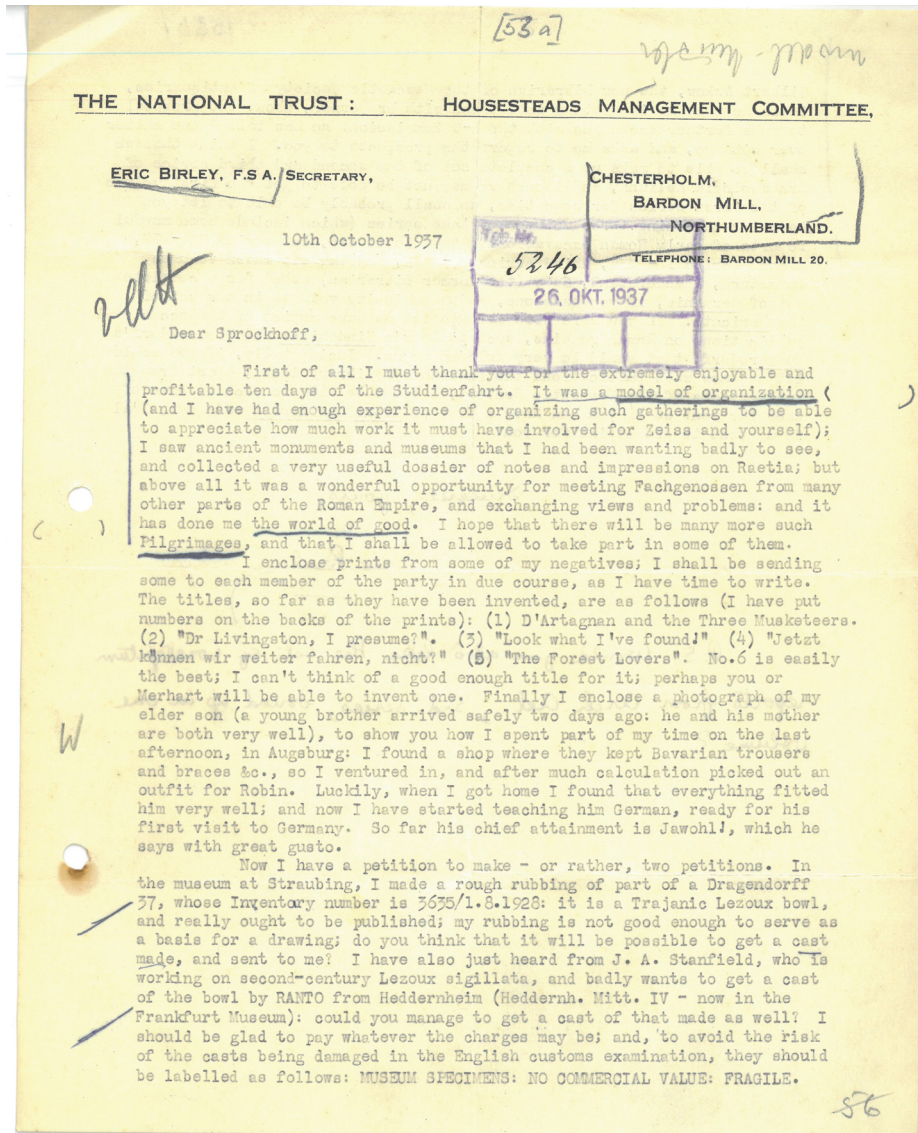


Fig. 1: Römisch-Germanische Kommission (Germany), a letter from Birley in the RGK Archiv. The first page of a letter, dated 10 October 1937, from Eric Birley to Ernst Sprockhoff

er die Zusammenarbeit wieder auf. Mithilfe der Archive des Vindolanda Trust und des RGK konnte im Rahmen des Projektes das akademische Netzwerk Birleys und dessen Beziehung zu Deutschland nachgezeichnet werden. Ziel war es, den Einfluss Birleys auf die Entwicklung der römischen Limesforschung als Teildisziplin in der Nachkriegszeit nachzuvollziehen.

SCHLAGWÖRTER

Birley, Limesforschung, Vindolanda, RGK, Archive, Wissenschaftliche Netzwerke

1 Eric Birley (1906–1995) was one of the most influential scholars of Roman frontier studies. He excavated across the north of Britain, taught generations of students at Durham University, and founded the Congress of Roman Frontier Studies (Limes Congress) in 1949. His research into the prosopography, epigraphy, history, and archaeology of the northern frontiers was shaped by his close connections with German scholars and research institutions, most notably the Römisch-Germanische Kommission (RGK) (Fig.1). This project reviewed personal archives in the UK and Germany belonging to Birley and his colleagues over a four-month period in 2023. From this material, it is possible to evaluate his intellectual and social networks, as well as his relationship with Germany, and to understand how he developed an international community for frontier studies following Second World War.

2 The majority of the archival material is held in two collections: the Eric Birley Archive at the Vindolanda Trust and the Birley legacy in the RGK Archiv. This is the first time these collections have been compared or used in combination, and they have proved to be complementary sources that can, in some instances, clarify the gaps in their respective records.

3 The Eric Birley Archive is held in the Chesterholm Museum at the Roman fort of Vindolanda¹. The archive includes personal papers from the family as well

1 Birley purchased Chesterholm, a farm including the Roman fort Vindolanda, from the Clayton estate in 1929. He lived at Chesterholm, excavated the site 1930–1935, and placed the fort into Guardianship of H.M Office of Works in 1939. Chesterholm was sold in 1950. The land, the fort, and the farm buildings were given in 1970 to the newly-established Vindolanda Trust, for which Eric Birley served as Chairman until his death. The Trust continues to research, excavate, and maintain the site and its museum.



Fig. 2: Chesterholm Museum, Vindolanda (United Kingdom), the Eric Birley Archive. The current organization of the Eric Birley Archive makes a review of its contents more challenging



Fig. 3: Römisch-Germanische Kommission (Germany), the Archiv. The RGK Archiv, stored in the Arndtstraße building

as material from Birley's office at Durham University, which was returned to the Vindolanda Trust in 2012. The collection has yet to be sorted, organized, cataloged, or archived, and there is no standardized reference system (Fig. 2). Reviewing it involves unpacking 13 large plastic boxes, 49 box files, and two file cabinets; it includes letters, notes, photographs, draft texts, offprints, and plates. While it encompasses Birley's entire career, more is preserved from his later years than the earlier period covered by this project. Nonetheless, individual pieces, including photographs, conference programs, and correspondence, offered new insights into his relationships with German colleagues – particularly when linked with material at the RGK.

4 Within the RGK Archiv (Fig. 3), there are three files relating to Birley². There are 299 pages, including correspondence between Birley and a number of different individuals at the RGK, as well as invoices, notices, and other documents. The material in Birley's legacy was systematically reviewed, and the dates, correspondents, and themes were tracked and analyzed. Birley communicated primarily with Kurt Stade before the war; after the war, his main contact was Wilhelm Schleiermacher, with whom he forged a close friendship, as evidenced in their letters.

5 Through the combination of Birley's materials at the Vindolanda Trust and the RGK, a network of his contacts beyond Stade and Schleiermacher emerged. Key figures include (in alphabetical order): Géza Alföldy, Gustav Behrens, Gerhard Bersu, Ernst Fabricius, Dietrich Hafemann, Ulrich Kahrstedt, Otto Kleemann, Werner Krämer, Franz Ölmann, Harald von Petrikovits, Hans-Georg Pflaum, Ernst Sprockhoff, Joachim Werner, and Hans Zeiss. A review of these legacies, in the RGK Archiv as well as in the Universität-Freiburg Universitätsarchiv and the Landesarchiv Schleswig-Holstein, produced further evidence of Birley's network and his role in shaping frontier studies.

6 The evaluation of these archival materials has produced several outcomes. In support of the DFG project »[Spuren archäologischer Wissensgenerierung. Propylaeum-VITAE – ein Instrument für die Wissenschaftsgeschichte der](#)

2 DE DAI-RGK-A 373 – Prof. Eric Birley, Dublin, 1931-1956; DE DAI-RGK-A 1389 – Prof. Eric Birley, Durham (England), 1957–1968; DE DAI-RGK-A 2230 – Prof. Dr. Eric Birley, Corbridge (England), 1958.

[Archäologie](#)« there are significantly expanded Propylaeum-VITAE entries for Eric Birley, Margaret Birley, Robin Birley, Anthony Birley, and Patricia Birley, as well as new entries for Andrew Birley and Dietrich Hafemann. Additionally, a number of the reviewed RGK Archiv files have been digitized.

7 The results of this research will be published in two forthcoming articles. One discusses the archaeological fieldwork conducted along Hadrian's Wall by German prisoners of war from Camp 18, Featherstone, as facilitated by Birley. The other will use the correspondence to detail Birley's academic network in Germany, his relationship to the RGK, and the ways in which his network shaped the early Congresses for Roman Frontier Studies. Both papers will highlight new insights into Birley's life and research, made possible through the same international collaboration between scholars and institutions for which he tirelessly advocated.



ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

Fig. 1: DE DAI-RGK-A 373, Prof. Eric Birley, Nr. 53a

Fig. 2: Catherine Teitz

Fig. 3: Catherine Teitz

CONTACT

Jun.-Prof. Dr. Catherine Teitz

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

FB 07/ IAW / Klassische Archäologie

Philosophicum II

Jakob-Welder-Weg 20

55128 Mainz

Germany

cteitz@uni-mainz.de

ORCID-ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0604-742X>

ROR ID: <https://ror.org/023b0x485>



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