



'alive' in their natural and cultural landscapes? Emily Hanscam and Cornelius Holtorf discuss how Hadrian's Wall and the Sycamore Gap tree can encourage us to rethink the relationships between humanity, nature, and the planet.



CURRENT ARCHAEOLOGY · **NOVEMBER 1, 2023**

As news of the felling of the Sycamore Gap tree spread online, there was an outpouring of shock and grief for the perceived loss of a landmark that had long featured prominently in the popular imagination. Its highly photogenic placement adjacent to Hadrian's Wall made it seem like an integral part of the Roman landscape, and initial reactions described the felling as an 'irreplaceable loss' and an 'attack on nature', concluding 'the tree is gone.' We contend, however, that the tree still lives, as the Roman wall itself still lives, although in ruins. We will discuss below the connection between the tree and Hadrian's Wall, and how this unfortunate event can encourage us to embrace change and transformation in nature and culture.





Gap, before its eponymous tree was felled this September. Photo: Clementp.fr, CC BY-SA 4.0

The origins of Hadrian's Wall will be familiar to many CA readers: the fortifications were built almost 2,000 years ago, during the reign of the emperor of the same name, as part of a Roman frontier network that stretched more than 7,500 miles across Europe, the Near East, and northern Africa. Spanning Britain at the Tyne/Solway isthmus, this wall would operate on and off as the Empire's northern boundary for the next three centuries. Although, as Richard Hingley points out in his *Hadrian's Wall: a life* (see 'Further reading' on p.50), the end of official Roman administration in Britain in the 5th century, and the conclusion of the Wall's life as a Roman frontier, was 'only one form of ending'. From the early medieval period onwards people have used the Wall – 'recreating it as a vital element of the landscape of northern England for their own times and telling many different stories that have kept its remains alive'.



perceived as a hard boundary between civilisation and outsiders, with surrounding popular narratives so strong that there is an ongoing misperception that the Wall equates to the modern-day border between England and Scotland. However, archaeological research has shown that Hadrian's Wall is better understood as a complex of structures meant to observe and manage the movement of people; alternatively (or additionally), it stood as a symbol of Roman power and authority in this distant region of the Empire. The Wall was, therefore, about far more than 'barbarians' versus 'Romans' – yet, because of the strength of the popular narratives surrounding the 'border' fortifications, many visitors continue to experience the remains of the Wall in this way. Such views encourage a static, unchanging public perspective of the remains, but we argue that Hadrian's Wall is a living monument with real relevance to modern socio-political narratives, often being drawn into discussions surrounding modern borderlands and ideas of national identity (see, for example, E Hanscam and B Buchanan's recent paper in *Antiquity*, 'Walled in: borderlands, frontiers, and the future of archaeology').





Wall: Hadrian's Wall west of Housesteads. Photo: E Hanscam

Signs from the soil

The Wall's significance was formally recognised by UNESCO in 1987, when it was inscribed as a World Heritage Site, and since 2005 it has formed part of the transnational property 'Frontiers of the Roman Empire', which runs through several countries. As with many archaeological monuments, the Wall is still partly buried underground, something that is a source of its integrity as a heritage site. While the Wall is often perceived as a monument of conflict and military defence, the purpose of the UNESCO World Heritage list is to advance





The tree may no longer stand tall, but the ecosystem of the stump and what lies below still maintain integrity too. In *The Hidden Life of Trees*, Peter Wohlleben writes that there are more life-forms in a handful of soil than there are people on the planet. This ecological context is resilient because it can regenerate and renew itself. The felled tree may regenerate from seeds and saplings (not to mention genetic cloning). The very stump still lives and may sprout again. In that sense, as nature has its way, the tree is neither ‘irreplaceable’, nor in fact really ‘gone’ or ‘lost’. Indeed, if seeds and saplings are taken and planted elsewhere, the future may see more than one ‘Sycamore Gap tree’, and in several locations.

Nature is about realising potential and continuous transformation, just as much as it is about the fight for survival. In the age of the current climate crisis, with some talking of an approaching planetary emergency, as humans we may be well advised to learn from natural processes of change and from life-forms displaying resilience in the face of transformation. Human societies also have to change from one generation to the next, and even individual human beings change with time. This link with natural processes can be seen in the growing trend in burial practices for humusation: a sustainable process of regenerating and returning to the earth billed as ‘the ecological alternative to burial and cremation’. As Robin Wall Kimmerer once put it, ‘The happy truth is that when I am an ancestor, I will be soil. Human become humus.’

