

ART. II.—*Excavations at Milecastle 49 (Harrow's Scar), 1953.* By I. A. RICHMOND, F.B.A.

Read at Carlisle, March 24th, 1956.

THE excavation described below was undertaken by the writer in April 1953, at the request of the Ministry of Works, in order to report upon the state of the milecastle before conservation of the Scar was put in hand. The milecastle (fig. 1) measures on its axes 76 ft. from north to south and 65 ft. from east to west; its walls are not strictly parallel. It had been examined by the Cumberland Excavation Committee in 1898,¹ when its relationship to the Vallum was studied; and its east and north walls had been treated by the Ministry in 1941, when attempts were being made to reinforce the face of Harrow's Scar, the steep declivity on the west bank of the river Irthing. The top of the Scar now lies 27 ft. east of the junction of the Wall and the milecastle; while the latter's north wall is in good condition, its interior is cut through by a sunken track or accommodation-road, leading to Underheugh farm, which passes at an oblique angle through the north gate, destroying its passage-walls, and is well below Roman ground-level where it bites through and completely destroys the south wall, just west of the south-east corner. Damage was also done, apparently in the 18th century, when the south half of the west side of the milecastle was occupied by a cottage with a deeply tilled garth extending to the north wall.

The objectives of the excavation were: first, to ascertain how much of the Stone Wall milecastle remained; second, to test for the existence of a Turf Wall milecastle below it; third, to check the previous account of the

¹ CWI xv 352 f. and 374-376 (plan at p. 375): of normal milecastles in this sector only 53 exceeds it in size (CW2 xxxiii 267).



facing p. 18

PL I.—Milecastle 49: south gate, looking east.

Photo: I. A. Richmond.

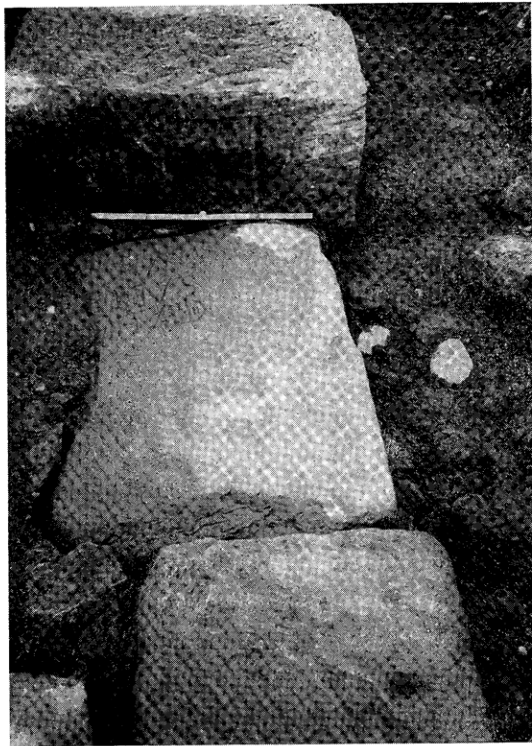


FIG. 1.—Milecastle 49, south gate: re-used tombstone underpinning threshold, and relief of Mars and Victory on jamb, looking east.

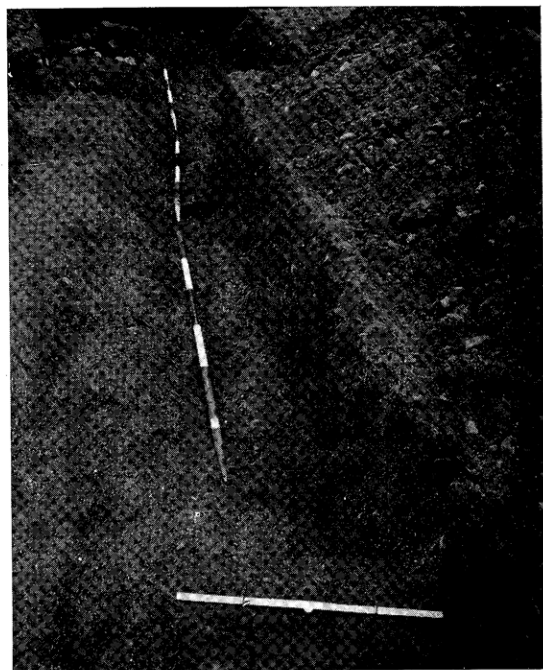


FIG. 2.—Lip of butt-end of Vallum ditch, milecastle 49 (marked by ranging-poles); to left is the trench of 1898, looking south.

Photos: I. A. Richmond.

relationship between the milecastle and the Vallum.² Accordingly, a start was made by examining the south gateway (fig. 2; pl. I), which proved to have been less damaged than had been feared. Its superstructure had vanished, but its foundations (see pl. I) closely resembled those of Type III gateways as at milecastle 50, 51 and 52,³ the backward tails in particular having survived well, though the east tail exhibited some irregularity on its east side. They were built in heavy flagging, combined with pitching and set in very sandy brown mortar; their size fits them to take a superstructure as large as those at milecastles 50 and 51, but not so big as at milecastle 52. In the second period the side walls, front jambs and threshold had been completely and drastically reconstructed, using the hard white mortar typical of this period on the Wall.⁴ Both passage-walls had been completely rebuilt and widened, with the effect of reducing the actual passage; thus, the east passage-wall, here and there two courses high, extended 18 in. beyond the edge of the earlier foundations, and was finished at the front of the gate by a large block of stone, 18 in. high by 21 in. wide and 36 in. long. This block was re-used: for a panel, 15 in. long, on its west face contained a crude relief of Mars and Victory (pl. II, 1), set upside down in the reconstruction, and once entirely hidden by the now vanished east impost of the rebuilt gateway. A comparably large stone, of which the bed was detected, had once occupied the corresponding position on the west side—from which stone-robbers had removed it, without, however, disturbing the secondary west jamb. When the missing details are supplied, the result is a reduced gateway closely resembling the south gates of the second (i.e. Severan) period at milecastles 50, 52 and 54.⁵ The

² CW1 xv cit.

³ Milecastle 50: CW2 xiii 330 and pl. xiii; milecastles 51 and 52: CW2 xxxv 251, fig. 23.

⁴ Cf. CW2 xxxiv 142, lii 23.

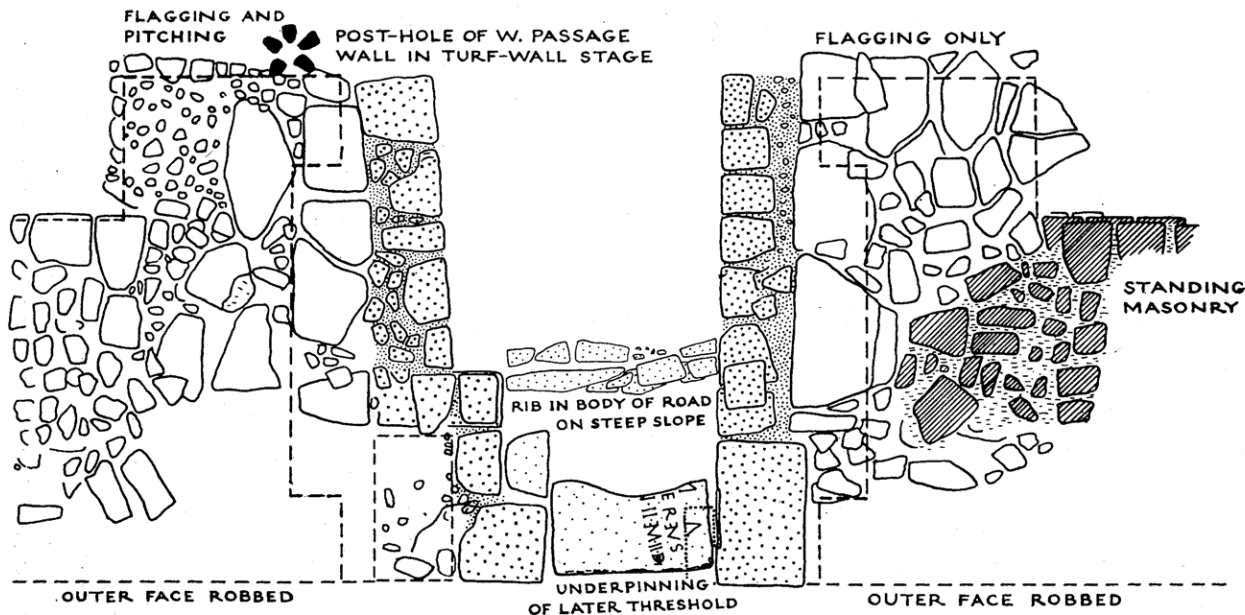
⁵ Milecastle 50: CW2 xiii 330 and pl. xiii; milecastle 52: CW2 xxxv 251 and fig. 23; milecastle 54: CW2 xxxiv 145, figs. 9 and 11.

only difference lies in the thickening of the passage-walls (only slightly suggested at milecastle 50) for their entire length here. This is not a typical feature; it seems best explained by the setting of the doors on a steepish southward slope. The threshold was underpinned by the right-hand half of an inscribed tombstone, still in position, the text of which is described below. Just behind the west side of the original gateway occurred a large stone-lined post-hole, belonging to the west side of the south gate of the Turf Wall milecastle, of which more is said below. To east of the gateway, the south wall of the milecastle stood three courses high internally and two externally: to west the external face had been reduced to a single course but the internal face was four courses high; the wall was 7 ft. 7 in. thick. The south-west corner was rounded both externally and internally; the south-east corner no doubt matched it, but had been totally destroyed by the lane to Underheugh farm. As noted above, this lane had also destroyed the passage-walls of the north gate.

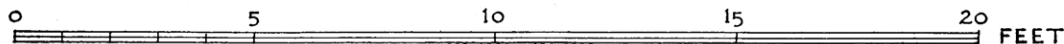
Examination of the west half of the milecastle showed that internal buildings, if they ever existed, had been totally removed by a relatively modern cottage, erected a little way inside the south-west corner and abutting upon the ruined west wall. The cottage had been a simple building, comprising one long room, 30 ft. long and 11 ft. wide internally, with a fireplace at its east end. To north lay a fragment of walling, suggestive of a front larder or dairy, and a garth or garden extending to the north wall of the milecastle; the soil of the garden area had been deeply dug, in the manner of a cottage garden, and nothing separated the rich humus from the undisturbed subsoil. Several trenches demonstrated that the Roman levels had been removed right up to the north and west walls of the milecastle, and that no ancient remains were to be recovered on this side.

The elongated triangle, which was all that remained of

HARROWS SCAR, 49: SOUTH GATE



□, ▨ PERIOD I ▤ PERIOD II



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FIG. 2.

the east half of the milecastle, was more fruitful. Two trenches here disclosed traces of Roman levels, much robbed and destroyed but sealing four courses of built turfwork, belonging to the east rampart of the Turf Wall milecastle. The top of the Scar had evidently in Roman times exhibited a gentle eastward slope, which the builders of the Stone Wall milecastle had made level, within their new walls, by leaving a heel of the Turf Wall milecastle's east rampart standing. The middle of the turf rampart, however, had been cut away by the foundation-trenches for the wall of the Stone Wall milecastle;⁶ if its east face had been left standing, as seems probable, all traces of it must have been removed in 1941, when the stone wall was cleaned down to its foundations for repair and conservation.

The north wall of the stone milecastle stands well; in relation to the ditch of the Wall it occupies the position of the Turf Wall, with a berm only eight feet wide.⁷ Behind it, a trial-hole disclosed the turfwork of the north rampart of the Turf Wall milecastle, together with a large stone-lined post-hole which was just overlapped by the stonework of the stone gateway. This post-hole can only be interpreted as one of the line of posts supporting the east side of the timber gateway tower, and its position relative to the ditch of the Wall shows that it must have been well forward in the line.⁸ In view of the removal of the Turf Wall, both inside and outside the west half of the milecastle, this discovery is of especial value: taken together with the post-hole from the west side of the south gate, it enables the axis of the Turf Wall milecastle to be plotted, and upon this basis the entire outline of that milecastle can be plotted in turn. Its internal dimensions can thus be calculated as 54 ft. from north to south and 50 ft. from east to west, as against 66 ft.

⁶ Cf. CW2 lii r8 and fig. 3 for similar conditions at milecastle 79.

⁷ For this narrow berm, and variants, cf. CW2 xxxiv r36.

⁸ Cf. CW2 xxxv 221 and fig. 2.

by 55 ft. at milecastle 50 TW.⁹ No trace of its internal buildings remained.

The third phase of the inquiry concerned the ditch of the Vallum. On the south, the general erosion of the face of the Scar has now bitten back to within between 20 and 24 ft. of the ditch, leaving no room for any portion of the south mound of the Vallum to have survived at this point—just as it has eaten, at a more gentle slope, to the very edge of the south wall of the milecastle. On the north, the back of the Turf Wall lies 36 ft. away from the Vallum ditch, leaving not enough room for the north mound (which required no less than 40 ft. space, including 20 ft. for the berm); since, however, it is now known that there was no north mound eastward of milecastle 50 TW, owing to the close proximity of the Turf Wall,¹⁰ we may interpret the state of affairs here in the same way, as indicating that no north mound was ever constructed. Trenching failed to corroborate this point, revealing only that the Roman surface had been completely stripped when the south face of the Stone Wall was cleared of fallen masonry in 1941; but nothing of the Turf Wall was recorded on that occasion by the late F. G. Simpson, who supervised the work, and it seems likely that all turfwork had been removed by the builders of the Stone Wall.

But if Nature had removed the south mound of the Vallum, its ditch still remained, and its north and south lips, now 22 ft. apart, were quickly found at two separate points, approaching the milecastle from the west. Allowing for erosion, this dimension would suggest an original width of just over 19 ft. (as at the Birdoswald causeway). The search was then carried further eastwards, to test the relationship between the Vallum and the milecastle. It was soon found that the ditch terminated in a square butt-end; and this was not part of a

⁹ CW2 xxxv 220.

¹⁰ CW2 xxxvii 171 f.

southward turn, as previously conjectured,¹¹ but complete in itself. There was an eroded overflow channel, about 18 in. deep, at its south-west corner; but this shallow and irregular feature had been made by water escaping from the choked ditch, long after its abandonment, and had nothing whatever to do with Roman times. It was instructive to recover the more easterly of the two trenches dug at this point in 1898. It had been only 18 in. wide, and nowhere more than 2 ft. deep (pl. II, 2: also fig. 1); it had been cut athwart the butt-end from the north, and had hit the top of the blackish filling of the ditch—but it was not wide enough, long enough or deep enough to enable the presence of the butt-end to be recognised. The point is mentioned here, because it demonstrates very clearly the limitations of the Cumberland Excavation Committee's early work, and the need to check conclusions based upon it either at the time or later.

The point at which the butt-end occurs, so decisively and abruptly, may be calculated as 15 ft. away from the west rampart of the Turf Wall milecastle and 17 ft. from the west wall of its stone counterpart. It does not come anywhere near the eastern face of the Scar, and there can be no doubt that the stop came at this point because the Turf Wall milecastle was already there (as at milecastle 50 TW) when the Vallum ditch was dug. But here the lack of any diversion of the ditch—in order to avoid the milecastle—also shows that the makers of the Vallum did not intend the ditch to run down the steep slope, where it would have formed a watercourse potentially productive of serious damage by erosion. The south mound, so largely composed of upcast from the ditch, presumably ended at the same point. The severe natural erosion that has occurred since Roman times makes it impossible to know now whether any obstacle of a different type (for example, a palisade or a hedge) took the

¹¹ CW2 xxxvi 168.

place of ditch or mound; all that remains clear is the fact that the barrier was interrupted in deference to a natural feature. Other points in Cumberland where a comparable interruption may have occurred are the steep east banks of the Cambeck at Castlesteads, and of the Eden at Carlisle; but at neither of these points do Wall and Vallum run so close together.

During the excavations two inscriptions were found. The first, which was unstratified, is an altar to Silvanus, lacking its top, its base having a projecting tenon for insertion into a larger stone. The inscription¹² reads: [deo | Si]l[v]an(o) | [F]lavius Marcel | linus dec(urio) | v. s. l. m.—“To the god Silvanus, Flavius Marcellinus, troop-commander, gladly and deservedly fulfils a vow.” The second inscription is on the broken fragment of a tombstone which served to underpin the threshold, now vanished, of the Severan south gate (pl. II, 1). It reads: [d(is)] m(anibus) A | [—]erenus | [vixit an]n(is) II me(nsibus) II d(iebus) III.—“To the shades of A—erenus, who lived two years, two months and three days.” The name of the little boy is irrecoverable now; it may be noted that this is not the first child’s burial from the Birdoswald cemetery, whence the stone was presumably derived: C. 865 records a tribune’s son, less than two years old.¹³

It may be recalled that John Clayton found two tombstones re-used inside milecastle 42 (Cawfields), presumably as flags: the inscription on one of them was “entirely effaced”, the other was the epitaph of a soldier, set up by his wife; Clayton observed that both had probably been removed “from the neighbouring burial ground of the Station of Aesica”.¹⁴ Milecastle 38 yielded an inscribed tombstone, in 3rd-century style, re-used as the pivot-stone in the Diocletianic reconstruction of the south gate,

¹² First published by Mr R. P. Wright, JRS xliv 105 (cf. also CW2 liv 267 f.).

¹³ This is a 3rd century stone, however (CW2 xxx 199).

¹⁴ AA1 iv 58 (the soldier’s epitaph is C. 692, cf. EE IX p. 592, now in the hesters Museum).

no doubt robbed from the cemetery lining the Military Way west of Housesteads fort;¹⁵ and it may well be that the fragmentary inscription found "in clearing the Wall on the basaltic heights between Rapishaw Gap and Caw Gap of its débris",¹⁶ too, comes from a tombstone, re-used in one or other Roman reconstruction of the Wall; in that case, as with the examples from milecastle 42, one of the cemeteries of Aesica was presumably the source.

¹⁵ AA4 xiii 265-267 and fig. 4 (the stone is now in the Housesteads Museum).

¹⁶ C. 697 (Chesters Museum: Bruce's description of the find-spot).