The eastern terminus of the Antonine Wall: 12th- or 13th-century evidence

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ABSTRACT

A crucial element in the recent definition of the eastern end of the Antonine Wall has been the testimony of early modern antiquaries. The claim of the now-favoured choice of Carriden (West Lothian) was in fact anticipated in a manuscript written at Sawley in the West Riding of Yorkshire (now in Lancashire) in 1202 x 1214.

INTRODUCTION

It is well known how unsatisfactory are ancient and medieval historical writers' references to the construction of the Roman frontier-walls in Britain (for the Antonine Wall see Hanson & Maxwell 1983; in general see Breeze 1982). One branch of historical 'knowledge' was summed up by St Jerome in his Chronicon (completed in AD 378), sub anno Abrahae 2221 (AD 205): 'Severus in Brittanos bellum transfert; ubi, ut receptas provincias ab incursione barbarica faceret securiores, vallum per .cxxxii. passuum milia a mari ad mare duxit' (Helm 1956, 212). By way of Orosius's Historiae adversum paganos, VII.17, 7 (Zangemeister 1882, 475), this information, slightly augmented, passed into Insular historical writing of the early Middle Ages. Bede (De temporum ratione, §LXVI, Chronica maiora §345) wrote, 'Severus in Brittannias bellum transfert; ubi, ut receptas provincias ab incursione barbarica faceret securiores, magnam fossam firmissimaque vallum crebris insuper turribus communitum per .cxxxii. milia passuum a mare ad mare duxit' (Mommsen 1891–8, III.289; Jones 1977, 502). In the summary chronicle which concludes his Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum (V.24: Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 562–3) he provided AD dating for Severus's reign (189–206): 'Anno ab incarnatione Domini .clxxxviii. Severus imperator factus .xvii. annis regnavit; qui Brittaniam vallo a mari usque ad mare praecinxit'. Full details were provided in an early chapter of the work (I.5: Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 24–7) which embodied some controversialist writing (cf Miller 1970). It seems clear that all these references were to Hadrian's Wall.

The Hieronymian tradition passed by a different route into Insular Celtic writing. In the early ninth-century Cambro-Latin Historia Brittonum (cf Dumville 1990, ch. I–VII), §23, we read that Severus was the third Roman ruler to visit Britain: 'Tertius fuit Severus, qui transfretavit ad Brittannos; ubi, ut receptas provincias ab incursione barbarica faceret tuiros, murum et aggerem a mari usque ad mare per latitudinem Britanniae, id est per .cxxxii. milia passuum deduxit, et vocatur

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britannico sermone guaul'. The author went on to observe that it was to separate the Britons on the one hand from the Gaels (Scotti) and Picts on the other (Mommsen 1891–8, III.165).

In this last point we see a reflex of a quite different approach. For the sixth-century British writer Gildas the history of the two Roman Walls was a live issue (De excidio Britanniae, I.14–19: Mommsen 1891–8, III.33–5; Winterbottom 1978, 21–3, 93–5). Here they dated, in reverse order of construction (turf Wall first, stone Wall later), from a period definable (although Gildas himself gave no dates) as AD 388 x 454 (for discussion see Thompson 1979, 205–8, and Dumville 1984 [= 1993, ch. II], 64). They were built to keep Gaels and Picts at bay.

Bede contrived to adopt Gildas's account also into his own narrative (Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum, I.12: Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 40–5). In a well-known passage he added precise topographic indications concerning the Antonine Wall: ‘Cuius operis ibidem facti, id est valli latissimi et altissimi, usque hodie certissima vestigia cernere licet. Incipit autem duorum ferme milium spatio a monasterio Aebbercurnig [= Abercorn, W. Lothian: see Thomas 1984] ad occidentem in loco qui sermone Pictorum Peanfahel lingua autem Anglorum Penneltun appellatur [= Kinneil], et tendens contra occidentem terminatur iuxta urbem Alcluith [= Dumbarton].’

THE SAWELEY SCHOOL OF HISTORICAL AND TEXTUAL RESEARCH

The Cistercian monastery of Sawley (otherwise Sallay) in the West Riding of Yorkshire was founded in 1148. From a half-century period, 1164 x 1214, we have two surviving manuscripts, each apparently written as well as owned there, containing a wide range of Latin historical (and some religious) texts (for disavowal of Sawley origin, see Baker 1975; for specific refutation see Dumville 1990, ch. VIII–XI). These are Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS. 139, written in 1164, and ibid., MS. 66 + Cambridge University Library MS. Ff.1.27 (1160), pp 1–40, 73–252, written in 1202 x 1214 (see Dumville 1990, ch. VIII–XI; Miller 1982, 137–42; cf Anderson 1980, 237, 243–4). The earlier manuscript contains texts copied with relatively few embedded additions, while the later comprises fair copies of texts which had been subjected to considerable revision and augmentation. One text in particular – Historia Brittonum, already mentioned – survives in both manuscripts and provides the clearest possible indication of the extensive processes of collation, revision, and augmentation undertaken before the fair copy was made; even then, some minor augmentations of the fair copy continued to be made for a brief while (Dumville 1990, ch. VIII–XI, and forthcoming). The texts contained in these two manuscripts, approximately 50 in all, provide a compelling range of testimony to a school of textual and historical research of remarkable industry.

Among the several unusual features of this activity, three should be mentioned here. The texts may survive only in the Sawley copy, or are extant here in a recension otherwise unknown to scholarship. Secondly, among the many items with which the texts copied were subsequently augmented at Sawley are materials of Celtic interest or origin, a fact which is only partly explained (Dumville 1977 [= 1990, ch. XI], and forthcoming). Finally, the Sawley editors developed a passion for prefacing detailed lists of capitula, contents-tables, to the texts which they were in effect preparing for republication.

THE ROMAN WALLS AND ARTHUR’S O’ON IN ADDITIONS TO HISTORIA BRITTONUM

In §XIX of the Sawley copies of Historia Brittonum an addition was made which decisively identified the Severan murum et aggerem with the Antonine Wall, taking the Brittonic word guaul, ‘wall’, as the cue. The additional information, dependent on Bede but moving beyond him, is
presented as a gloss on the statement of distance found in the text of Historia Brittonum: ‘Per .cxxxii. miliaria passuum, id est, a Penguaul – que villa scottice Cenail [= Kinneil], anglice vero Peneltun, dicitur – usque ad ostium fluminis Cluth [= R. Clyde] et Cair Pentaloch [= Kirkintilloch], quo murus ille finitur, rustico opere Severus ille predictus construxit; sed nichil profuit’ (Dumville 1977, 22–4; Dumville 1985–, VII; note that the text should probably read ‘usque ad Cair Pentaloch et ad ostium fluminis Clut’). A further addition, immediately following, tells us that another Emperor, unhelpfully named Carucius/Carutius (Karitius in some other versions), renewed the wall; this Emperor is then credited (in an addition which, on the evidence of the capitula, was at one time intended to go into the following chapter) with the building of a triumphal monument by the River Carron: ‘Carutius postea imperator reedificavit, et .vii. castellis munivit inter utraque ostia; domumque rotundam politis lapidibus super ripam fluminis Carun, quod a suo nomine nomen acceptit, fornicem triumphalem in victorie memoriam erigens, construxit’. This would appear to be the earliest certain reference to Arthur’s O’on (on which monument see most recently Brown & Vasey 1989; but cf Loomis 1956, 4–5, 15; Dumville 1975 [= 1990, ch. XII], 107, and 1977 [= 1990, ch. XI], 22–4).

Finally, a third capitulum (§XXIII) refers very specifically to what we know as Hadrian’s Wall: ‘De secundo etiam Severo qui solita structura murum alterum, ad arcendos Pictos et Scottos, fieri a Tinenuthe [= Tynemouth, Northumberland] usque Boggenes [= Bowness-on-Solway, Cumberland]’ (Mommsen 1891–8, III.128; Dumville 1985–, VII; this is marginally the oldest and linguistically most archaic form attested for Bowness, as may be seen from Armstrong et al. 1950–2, I.123).

CARRIDEN: THE EASTERN TERMINUS OF THE ANTONINE WALL

In the later of the two Sawley manuscripts (MS. Ff.1.27, pp 1–14) is preserved a copy of Book I of Gildas, De excidio Britanniae, a rare work in the Middle Ages. The text ends uniquely with a hexametrical scribal colophon naming one Cormac:

Historiam Gylde Cormac sic perlege scriptam
Doctoris digitis sensu cultuque redactam.
Hec tenues superat multos carpitque superbos.

Dr Neil Wright has kindly offered the following translation:

Read Gildas’s History, copied thus by the fingers
of the teacher Cormac [and] edited with meaning and elegance.
It overcomes many who are lightweight and it criticises the proud.

The name Cormac is Gaelic. Previously I assumed Cormac to have been Irish (Dumville 1977, 44–6), but in view of the run of Scottish (perhaps especially St Andrews) interests through the Sawley manuscripts the possibility of a north British domicile for Cormac should not be overlooked. This may be a red herring, however: unless Cormac’s poem was written at Sawley, he can have had no connection with the capitula discussed in what follows. The text here has been equipped in the Sawley fashion with a list of 20 capitula (printed with minor inaccuracies by Mommsen 1891–8, III.17–18). Two of these (IX, XI), given Gildas’s concern with the Walls, turn out to be of interest here. We may begin with the second.

.XI. Quomodo Britones rursum romanum solatium repetierunt, et qualiter Romani sese excusaverunt, sed tamen laudare et monere ceperunt, ut murum a mari ad mare facerent, quod et fecerunt a mari
Norwagie usque ad mare Galwadie, per octo pedes latum et duodecim 'in' altum et turres per intervalla construxerunt, eo in loco ubi Severus imperator maximam fossam firmissimumque vallum, crebris insuper turribus communitum, per c.xxxii. milia passuum longe ante fecerat, id est a villa que anglice Wallesende dicitur, latince vero Caput Muri interpretatur, que est iuxta Tinemuthie, qui murus multum distat a prefato vallo apud meridiem, quem anteapud Kair Eden supra mare Scotie constituerunt.

I have italicized what is drawn from the account of this episode by Bede (Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum, I.12), emboldened what is found in his account of the Severan vallum in I.6 and underlined what occurs in his treatment of the same in De temporum ratione (above). The chronicle from the latter text is found in the same Sawley manuscript as the copy of Gildas's work (Cambridge University Library MS. Ff. 1.27: Bede's text at pp. 73–116; they are separated by the copy of Historia Brittonum).

Here we have some specification about the eastern end of Hadrian's Wall, at Wallsend (with a name-form identical to that of the first attested occurrence, c 1085: Ekwall 1960, 493; cf Mawer 1920, 205) near Tynemouth. The capitularist then concluded with a cross-reference to the Antonine frontier-line, noting that Wallsend was far distant from the more northerly Wall which the Romans had previously constructed apud Kair Eden supra mare Scotie.

Before giving the text to which this reference naturally leads us, I should like to hesitate for a moment over the capitularist's names for the seas around Scotland. Hadrian’s Wall stretches, in his account, from Mare Norwagie, ‘the sea of Norway’ (viz, North Sea), to Mare Galwadie, ‘the sea of Galloway’ (viz, Solway Firth); likewise, the Antonine Wall extends from Mare Scotie, ‘the sea of Scotia’ (viz, Firth of Forth), to (in capitulum IX) Mare Hibernie, ‘the sea of Ireland’ (water which leads ultimately to the Irish Sea but is, in fact, the Firth of Clyde). There are interesting parallels of arrangement here, but also unexpected names. It would be good to know how these fit with 12th- and 13th-century Scottish and English usage.

I have italicized those portions of this statement which have been drawn verbatim, though not in the same order, from Bede (Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum, I.12). This reference to Carriden (Kair Eden) was known to and quoted in translation by W J Watson (1926, 369–70), albeit with an impenetrable series of following comments about the identification, thus inaugurating a philological tradition of making heavy weather in this connection; but it seems to have escaped the attention of recent students of the Antonine Wall. Its importance is twofold: it tells us where the Wall was thought to have terminated, what the name of this place was, and therefore about the shifting relationships of name and place. We also learn something about the connections between Scotland and Cistercian Yorkshire in the later 12th century.

First, there is the question of the name. The oldest datable form quoted by Watson (1926, 370) and Angus MacDonald (1941, 25–6) was of c 1148, in a document (allegedly an original single sheet) of Robert, bishop of St Andrews (1124–59), granting the church of Carriden to the Augustinian abbey of Holyrood at Edinburgh (Lawrie 1905, 165–6, 416, no. CCVI), and showing the usual later medieval form for the first element (Karreden). These Gildasian capitula, in a manuscript of the beginning of the 13th century, twice demonstrate the Old Cumbric form with great clarity; and
from the Sawley additions to Historia Brittonum we must remember also Penguaul for Kinneil and the remarkable hybrid Cumbro-Gaelic Cair Pentaloch for Kirkintilloch (Watson 1926, 346–8). There is every reason to think that the Sawley school was in effective contact with Scotland in the half-century 1164–1214 (for further evidence to this effect, see Barrow 1973, 200–3), but also that it had connections with Wales (Dumville 1977, passim); either or both of these points could have ensured the accurate use of Brittonic forms. The multilingualism displayed, in as much as it included Gaelic, suggests that the claim for Scottish influence in the work of the Sawley school should be admitted.

Kenneth Jackson strongly denied that Carriden derives from Old Cumbrić Cair Eidyn (1969, 77–8; cf 1953, 362, n.1 and 1963, 80–3; MacDonald 1941, 26, offered a possible explanation involving the Cumbrić equivalent of Welsh cardden) and urged that the notice in the Gildasian capitulum was a foreigner’s attempt to refer to Edinburgh. (But the capitolarist was not living in Ireland, as Jackson supposed – he wrote at Sawley: for further and fuller discussion see Watson 1926, 340–2, who showed beyond reasonable doubt what Jackson was to deny, that Eidyn could have been an area-name.) The objections that ancient Carriden had a Roman-period name, Velunia(s), and that it was not the sort of major site which would attract a Brittonic Cair-name (the latter statement is doubly incorrect: note also Jackson’s earlier opinion, 1963, 80–1, that Cumbrić Cair- referred to minor places), may be brushed aside as neither here nor there, in view of the specific identification in the text. (One is also tempted to wonder whether in the phrase Kair Eden civitas antiquissima the capitolarist was attempting an etymology.)

Secondly, there is the question of situation. The text describes Kair Eden not only as a very old civitas but also (accepting Bede’s information) as situated almost two miles west of Abercorn (the capitolarist’s appears to be the first reported occurrence of this form: MacDonald 1941, 13), as standing on the mare Scotie, and as constituting one end of the Roman Wall. Carriden meets all these points very satisfactorily (Bailey & Devereux 1987; St Joseph 1949; Richmond & Steer 1957). It was a major Roman fort; moreover, a substantial vicus stood on its eastern side. Edinburgh is 15 miles to the east and it is inconceivable that the capitolarist, accepting Bede’s specific geographical information, was seeking to refer to it. We may allow, then, that the Sawley capitolarist, writing c 1200, had access to local knowledge: Carriden was observed to meet Bede’s data about the eastern end of the Roman Wall. Its relationship to the place which was called Peanfahel in Pictish, Penneltun in Old English, both according to Bede, and also Cemnhail in Irish and Penguail in Old Cumbrić, is a consequent difficulty. On the face of it, this is Kinneil (Watson 1926, 346–8; cf MacDonald 1941, 30–2), where there is a Roman fortlet. There is indeed an apparent contradiction between the two statements in Sawley additions, the capitula to Gildas’s text (the Wall begins at Kair Eden near Abercorn) and the scholium to Historia Brittonum (at Penguaul-Cenail-Peneltun); although the existing copies of both were written c 1200, the scholium seems to derive from an earlier written source. We are obliged to suppose that the settlement-name has shifted: Kinneil, even taken as estate or parish (extending to the east of Bo’ness) rather than place, does not meet Bede’s description; in as much as the name, in three Celtic languages, means ‘end of the wall’ (compare the English equivalent, Wallsend [on Tyne], at the eastern end of Hadrian’s Wall), we must suppose that it once applied to Carriden, but that, as that name became established and physical evidence for the line of the easternmost sector of the Wall disappeared, the name ‘End of the Wall’ (in whichever Celtic language) moved westward in pursuit of its monument.

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