

REPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS.

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REPORT

PRESENTED TO THE

**Cambridge Antiquarian Society,**

AT ITS FORTY-EIGHTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING,

MAY 21, 1888,

WITH AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY  
1887—1888.

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ALSO

**Communications**

MADE TO THE SOCIETY.

No. XXX.

BEING No. 4 OF THE SIXTH VOLUME.

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# REPORT

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## Cambridge Antiquarian Society,

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WITH APPENDIX.



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XVI. ON THE ANCIENT EARTH-WORKS BETWEEN THE MOUTH OF THE TYNE AND THE SOLWAY. Communicated by Professor HUGHES. (With one Plate.)

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[October 31, 1887.]

FROM history, and from the objects found, it is known that the Romans occupied, strongly fortified, and long held, the country between the mouths of the Solway and the Tyne. So everything has been looked at from the Roman point of view. The question has been always 'when and why did the Romans make this object or construct that work?' not 'did the Romans construct it, or adopt and modify pre-existing works?'

The analogy of similar things referred to the Romans elsewhere has been sought, but seldom has there been a comparison of works found along the line of Roman advance with those constructed by the pre-Roman inhabitants of Britain in other parts of our island.

I invite the Society to-night to consider the question from the British stand-point.

I have already more than once called attention to the distinguishing characters of the camps of the native British, who were acquainted with all the passes and the strongholds which commanded them, as compared with the camps of the invading Romans, all ordered on one plan, easily carried out whatever the nature of the ground might be.

Let us then examine the distribution of the British camps in the district between the Tyne and the Solway, in order that we may be in a position to consider whether some of the works which have been called Roman do not seem to be connected

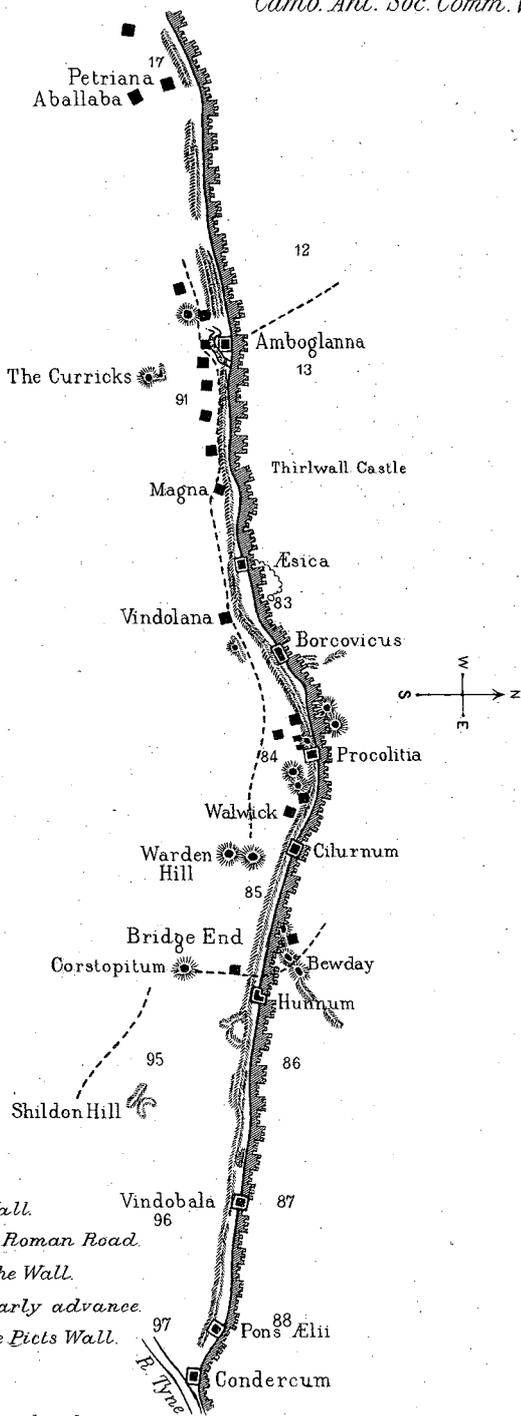
rather with the British than with the Roman occupation of the district.

I do not propose now to offer any criticisms upon the Roman Wall, properly so called, in fact I have not much to add to what has already been said about it. Nor do I refer to previous writers except to say that I visited it formerly under the guidance of Dr Bruce, and recently under that of Dr Hodgkin, who almost carry in themselves the literature of the subject.

I confine myself to the discussion of one point. What is the "Vallum"?

To help in this enquiry I laid down upon the six inch map, in blue, the earth-works which I think should be referred to the British, and in red the Roman. Others of doubtful age I coloured yellow. Further, I prepared a rough diagram on which the results are brought together on the scale of 1 inch to the mile, a reduction of which to the scale of about 6 miles to 1 inch is given in the Plate annexed to this paper.

Why did every successive wave of Roman advance seem to be checked along the line of the Roman Wall? It is true that the estuary of the Solway and the Tyne offered at either end a safe point on which to rest the flank of an advancing army, but all the intermediate ground was easily traversed. No physical feature of any importance barred their progress: yet the remains of walls and earth-works tell us that it was here, in the middle of the low undulating country, that the greatest difficulty was met with. Only some of the camps are Roman; a large proportion are the irregular rounded forms which for convenience are collectively spoken of as British. The wave of Roman military advance here broke on a low bank bristling with British forts—Borcovicus at the west end and Hunnum at the east end, being themselves for some reason of different form from the other Roman camps. It is clear that this district was strongly held by the British. At least twelve British earth-works may be traced within a distance of twelve miles from east to west, and



-  Roman Wall.
-  Supposed Roman Road.
-  Camps on the Wall.
-  Camps of early advance against the Picts Wall.
-  Picts Wall.
-  British Earthworks.
-  British Camps.

three miles from north to south. These are flanked by long lines of fosse and vallum near Borcovicus and Bewclay. Irregularly entrenched positions are seen on the south-east at Hunnum, Corstopitum, and perhaps Shildon Hill. The two first were occupied and modified by the Romans, but the outer earth-works show that they had been originally British towns.

Within the same area, counting Corstopitum, twelve Roman camps occur, and the Roman Wall bends four miles to the north to take this district in.

The Roman camps are of very different sizes. They point, not to one steady advance but to different attempts, sometimes with larger, sometimes smaller bodies of troops. This is a point that should be carefully worked out all along the Roman Wall, if we are right in supposing that the Romans made their symmetrical camps always with reference to the troops to be contained, whereas the irregular British camps were constructed to take advantage of the inequalities of the ground, and extended up to any precipice or river, regardless of the area thus included. These small Roman camps are irregularly distributed throughout the district, and seem to point to the earlier advance far into the enemies' country. The larger camps along the district south of the Wall from Amboglanna to Magna, most of them with lunettes or barbicans, show the advance of a stronger body of troops up to a definite line.

The Romans were of course victorious in the long run. The British camps were stormed, and the towns taken. Perhaps it was then that the British towns Hunnum and Corstopitum were occupied. But it is a curious circumstance that with very few exceptions, such as the small camp near Bewclay, these Roman camps were all crowded along the south side of the earth-works, known as the "Vallum," which run south of the Roman Wall. Except where the basalt precipices run, there is no geographical reason for this, but it is easily explained on the hypothesis that the British held some line of defence approximately coinciding

with the Vallum. In later times there was a distinct advance north of the Vallum. This is marked by the great camps afterwards joined together by the Roman Wall.

Can we then suppose that some such earth-work did exist in pre-Roman times, but that the Romans built their wall on it and obliterated it? There are many difficulties in the way of the acceptance of this hypothesis. The British had, it is true, not always selected the best line even for their own purposes in each part of the district, because they wished to make it as short and straight as possible, but it was chosen as on the whole the best line of defence against the *South*.

The Romans could not leave this line north of them, and therefore must have built on it or beyond it. But the Romans wished to construct a line of defence against the *northern* tribes. Thus it was improbable that exactly the same line as that selected by the British would suit the Roman engineers, and if they could not build on it they would have to build beyond the British entrenchments, and include them.

In accordance with this view we find south of the wall of masonry, at a distance varying from nothing to nearly half a mile, the long line of earth-works known as the Vallum, often hanging on the steep slope of the hills facing south, generally consisting of a deep fosse on the south, and a bank on the north, or a succession of such entrenchments apparently thrown up with a view to defence against the rush of a southern foe.

The terminations of these banks are undefended; they are sloped off, leaving the ends of the fosse exposed. They overlap one another, or have short outer works unterminated, in a manner with which we are familiar in British camps, e.g. that on Hereford Beacon. This is well seen about half a mile south-west of Amboglanna, where the earth-works of the Vallum do not end off abruptly as shown upon the six-inch map, but die out as I have drawn them.

If there be, as I have pointed out, much to suggest that there was somewhere along the Roman Wall a continuous line of defence held by the British against the Roman advance, may not this great continuous line of earth-works known as the "Vallum" be the "Picts' Wall" facing south, as the Roman Wall beyond it shows its strong front to the north?

The natives have preserved in their own tongue the tradition of their own lines of defence, and speak of the "Picts Wall," not of the later "Roman Wall."

The alternative is the usually received opinion that the Romans, when they built their wall, threw up also a line of earth-works, firstly in order to ward off any sudden attack from the powerful tribes they had left behind them, who might gather in the rough wooded ground on the northern slopes of the Pennine Range or on the wild moorlands beyond that, and secondly in order to provide a safe belt of land between two lines of defence in which the cattle, for the supply of their garrisons, might graze, and along which their road might run.

Is it probable that while they used masonry all along the northern line they should have had only earth-works even in the weakest parts of the defences on the south, or that they should have thought it necessary to run such a line within a few feet of a strong wall; the wall moreover being equally well faced on both sides, and no readier access being afforded to the part that on this hypothesis ran between their own lines?

The wall *was* the road for the Romans in time of danger. They did not need another road outside except for trade and ordinary traffic in time of peace, and then it was unnecessary to enclose it. An examination of the run of the "Vallum" shows, when once the question has been raised, how unlikely it is that the Romans could have constructed it *when they built their wall*. It is often for many miles too near the Roman Wall to leave any room worth mentioning between the two for grazing cattle; and—a still stronger argument,—the "Wall" and "Vallum"

are for many miles so far apart as to have rendered it impossible to man the "Vallum" without dangerously weakening the defence wall.

Between Appletree and Wall Bowers the Roman Wall cuts off the end of one of the lines of the "Vallum." If a Picts' Wall, with its many lines of fosse and vallum, existed before the Roman Wall, it is easy to see how this might happen. The fosse and vallum cut off by the wall was a British covered line of advance from the higher ground to the entrenchments lower down the hill. But, on the hypothesis that the "Vallum" was constructed by the Romans with an interval between it and the "Wall" to protect their roadway and their cattle, here was an obstacle to both. It would not be a likely place for them to build a hedge to limit the straying of the cattle, as that might have been done more easily a little further on, whereas this was a longer line to construct, and in a less convenient part for the purpose suggested.

That the Romans modified a pre-existing earth-work, rendered it less dangerous to themselves, and utilised the fosse to rest their camps upon, is likely enough.

That they may for some reason have excavated the basalt blocks which lie, a source of great wonderment, beside the Vallum about a mile east of Procolitia is not improbable; but we must remember that, as the rock was already cut up by joints, the removal of the blocks by the pre-Roman people would not be such a marvel as the construction of cromlechs, menhirs, and chambered tombs.

It may be felt to be a difficulty in the way of accepting the view here advocated that the great barrier between the Danube and the Rhine, the Limes Imperii (Pfahlgraben or Teufelsmauer or Schweingraben), which is generally attributed to the Romans, is like the *Vallum*, and not like the *Murus* of North Britain. But, seeing that there are important differences between the various portions of that earth-

work; that it was not always represented by a single or even double bank and ditch; perhaps a similar line of enquiry might suggest a doubt as to whether parts at any rate of those works may not have been adapted, rather than constructed, by the Romans.

The historical mention of appointing a *limes* can hardly be considered as evidence of the construction of a wall; for, if we forced this kind of argument, we should prove that when the Romans fixed the Limes Saxonicus they excavated the English Channel.

The occupation of an old line of defensive works, adjoining strong natural features, and the building of forts along it, would be a natural and probable course for the Romans to have pursued.

On the whole therefore it would appear:

(1) That the distribution of the Roman camps suggests that there was a system of defensive works held by the British approximately along the line of the "Vallum."

(2) That the "Vallum" must have been a source of weakness and danger to the Roman "Wall."

(3) That the position and arrangement of the lines of the "Vallum" are inconsistent with the hypothesis that it was constructed *at the same time as* the "Wall."

(4) That the "Vallum" cannot be considered a Roman work thrown up as a line of defence against the Caledonians during an earlier advance long before the Wall was built, because its construction shows that it was intended as a defence against the south.

(5) That in character the "Vallum" represents British rather than Roman work.

(6) That the "Vallum" should be regarded as the pre-Roman Picts' Wall afterwards included within the Roman line of forts, which were lastly joined together by the Roman Wall.