

ART. XXXIII. *Five Years Excavation on the Roman Wall.*
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THIRTEEN years ago the historian Mommsen described the Roman Wall between Newcastle and Carlisle as the best known of all the great Roman military works, and his words were an honour to English archæology. But they are no longer so true as in 1885. Since that date the scientific labours of the Imperial "Limes-commission" have made our knowledge of the Roman frontier works in Germany far more minute than our knowledge of the English Wall. The Wall is, indeed, imperfectly known, despite much patient and skilful study. The great Survey made in 1852-4 by Mr. Henry Maclauchlan at the expense of the Duke of Northumberland was an admirable achievement and the "Memoir" which forms the text to it, is one of those rare works where constant use reveals not demerits but only further merits.* The descriptions of the Wall by Horsley, Hutton, Hodgson, and Bruce combine personal observation with learning and judgment. But neither the Duke's Survey nor the descriptions just named are in reality anything more than surface descriptions. The spade was rarely used to prove theories which were suggested by the appearance of the ground, and excavations made in some of the forts were incompletely recorded or more often not recorded at all. The result is inevitable. Our best descriptions of the Wall contain many statements which are guesses, others which are actually wrong, and our maps lay down the lines of Roads or Wall or Vallum with a false and misleading precision. But efforts at improvement have lately

* I except the etymologies, which are ridiculous.

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been made. Excavations have been initiated by the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries and by the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archæological Society, and these, though not comparable with the systematic and extensive operations of the German Limes-Commission, have produced real advance. Accident has effected a curious but useful division of labour in these excavations. The Newcastle excavators have been mainly busy with forts, Great Chesters and Housesteads; the work of the Cumberland Society has lain along Wall and Vallum and roads outside the forts, and it has been possible to carry out this work in Northumberland as well as on the west coast. The present is the fifth year of these investigations into the Wall and the Vallum. The Romans held a census every five years, and excavators of a Roman Wall may fairly follow the example and review the results of five years work. Annual Reports of this work have been issued, but those Reports have necessarily been crowded with details of measurements, of sites and of subsoils which are as unintelligible to the ordinary reader as they are indispensable to the archæological record. The following paragraphs are an attempt to review the results of the five campaigns in their broad aspects and unencumbered with names or details.

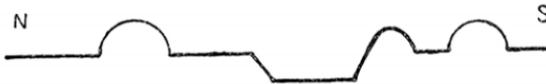
These results, like most things, can be divided under two heads. First, there are discoveries concerning the Vallum and a previously unknown Turf Wall, which may be called individually important: they have at any rate, done much to render obsolete all previous accounts of the Wall and its appurtenances. Secondly, there are smaller discoveries, singly unimportant but sufficient collectively to correct or extend appreciably our knowledge of these frontier works.

I commence with the Vallum. The most diverse dates and objects have been assigned to this strange earthwork. The "authorized" view of Bruce & Hodgson explains it as

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a military work erected at the same time as the Stone Wall by Hadrian and intended to guard that wall from southern insurgent assault. But competing explanations abound. The Vallum has been called a Pre-Roman frontier between two pre-historic tribes, constructed two or three centuries before the Christian era. It has been called an earthwork thrown up to protect the builders of the Stone Wall and then converted into a real defence for the completed Wall. It has been called a civil or more precisely a non-military line marking the Roman frontier before it was deemed to need fortification. It has been called a road or the cover for a road. It has not, like Stonehenge, been attributed to the Apalachian Indians, nor explained, like that, as an orrery or a theodolite, but has provoked almost as much curiosity as the great stones on the Wiltshire downs, and has defied that curiosity as successfully.

In itself, the Vallum is a massive but not an elaborate work. Trenches dug across it in 1893-4 in Northumberland and in 1894-5 in Cumberland, shewed its construction clearly. It is a wide flat bottomed ditch, varying somewhat in size at various places but often thirty feet from lip to lip and seven feet from top to bottom. Out of it the soil was cast north and south into two continuous mounds which were set back from it (fig. annexed) to



ensure that the soil should not slip in again. A third and smaller mound usually runs along the south margin of the ditch and probably embodies the final clearing out of soil, or just conceivably a subsequent renovation. No trace of a Roman road has been found in any trench* and the

* The road at Down Hill (*Archæologia Aeliana*, vol. xvi, p. xxvi) seems not to be Roman, so far as it has been at present examined.

view that the Vallum was a road may now be dismissed. Indeed its course and the mere state of the surface at Limestone Bank, for instance, suffice, even without excavation, to condemn such a view. The ditch apparently was the important part of the work. We find it cut in several places through solid basalt or limestone, while the mounds seem to have been absent in the immediate vicinity of one or two forts.

In its course the Vallum runs roughly parallel to the Stone Wall. It never touches or impinges on it, but like it pursues a straight line—more precisely a flexible line composed of straight pieces. Wherever a fort or mile-castle stands across its naturally straight course, it deviates and passing to the south, returns to its former line.* The methods of deviation vary. At Birdoswald it comes so close to the southwest corner of the fort as almost to cross it and certainly to leave no proper room for the mound on the north side of its ditch: it then skirts round the south face of the fort in a rather irregular line, passes clear of the south-east corner and soon rejoins its former direction. At Carrawburgh it runs straight up to the fort on both sides. At Rudchester and probably at Halton it deviates southwards at some distance from the fort which it avoids. These variations may well be due to local circumstances, but they deserve note even in a summary.

We have, then, ditch and mounds. For the interpretation of them we can say, first, that the whole (with the one conceivable exception of the marginal mound) was constructed at one time: that is shewn by the fact that the upcast in the north and south mounds is similarly distributed and stratified. Further, the work is Roman: that is shewn both by its straightness and, still more, by

* In this matter our excavations have shewn Maclauchlan, Bruce, and others to be wrong. Bruce (for instance) says that at Rudchester the Vallum joined the fort in a line with its southern rampart, and this has been generally regarded as its normal course near other forts: it is so drawn on Maclauchlan's and the Ordnance Maps. But so far as we have dug, the Vallum nowhere takes this line.

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its deviations to avoid fort or milecastle. Thirdly, its object is not military. This has been established, not so much by excavation as by a study of its course and character, in which scholars and military specialists acquainted with Roman antiquities have combined together.* The character of the Vallum, a ditch between mounds, has been recognised as wholly unsuitable to military uses and its course has been noticed to be such as not unfrequently to make it indefensible against the south. We must therefore give up the view of Hodgson and Bruce, that it was meant to protect the Stone Wall from assaults in the rear and we must give up any other theory which assigns it a military character.† It is a ditch between mounds, made by the Roman for some purpose, legal or other, which was not directly connected with fighting or fortification. To these three fairly certain conclusions, I add a fourth which is less certain. I believe, however, that the purpose of the Vallum was forgotten or ignored even in Roman times. The ditch seems to have been early filled up where its presence may well have been inconvenient, as near a fort.‡ This is the more intelligible, because it had no regular bridges or crossings, so far as is known to us. But no evidence exists to shew when during three centuries of Roman rule the inconvenient parts of the ditch were, as I think, filled in.

Finally, we reach the question of precise date and object. As to date, the Vallum can scarcely be later than

* I allude especially to General O. von Sarwey, Military Director of the German "Limes-commission" who traversed the Wall in 1893, and General Sir Wm. Crossman. General Pitt Rivers, I believe, pronounced against the military character of the Vallum many years ago.

† For logical completeness a footnote may add that the Vallum cannot possibly have been meant for defence against the north and this idea has never been proposed by anyone who has ever seen the work.

‡ For instance at Carrawburgh and Birdoswald the Vallum ditch near the forts had apparently been filled in all at once, while the ditches of the forts had equally plainly silted up gradually. This we inferred from the difference of soils in the various ditches within a few yards distance.

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the Stone Wall forts and mile castles: nor can it be earlier, since it deviates to avoid them. It is natural, therefore, to adopt one part of Hodgson and Bruce's theory, call Vallum and Wall contemporary and ascribe both to Hadrian. We know from inscriptions and literature that that Emperor erected a wall, with forts and milecastles, from sea to sea, and, at first sight, that wall would seem identical with the Stone Wall that can still be traced mile after mile across the moors, and its forts and milecastles with the buildings on which we still look with astonishment. If this is so, the Vallum must represent a line of civil or legal delimitation, just as the Wall unquestionably forms the military barrier, and both were constructed about A.D. 124.

Here however we are met by a difficulty of a hitherto unexpected kind. It has been said of excavations in earthworks that you cannot solve one puzzle without creating several new ones. The remark has certainly been verified in our trenches. One of the most striking discoveries was that of a previously unknown Wall, built neither of stones like the Stone Wall, nor of loose upcast like the Vallum, but of regularly laid sods, like the Wall of Pius in Scotland: on its north side is a stately ditch. This *muris caespiticius*, to give its accurate Roman designation, runs roughly parallel to both Wall and Vallum along the interval between them. It is older than either Stone Wall or Stone fort, for its ditch has been traced beneath both. But its remains are restricted to one neighbourhood, Birdoswald, and one stretch of two miles: at each end of that distance it coincides with the Stone Wall and no more is to be seen of it. Search has been made for it elsewhere along the seventy-three miles of Wall, but in vain. Two explanations can be offered of this new Wall. Possibly it is the sole surviving relic of a Turf Wall which once reached from sea to sea, and when, at some later date, the existing Stone Wall was built, that was raised
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precisely on the top of it except for two miles at Birdoswald. As for the fort, though no traces are visible, there may have been at first a small (earthen?) fort : when the Stone Wall was built, a larger stone fort may have been reared with it and thus it came about that the ditch of the Turf Wall underlies the fort of Birdoswald. In that case we shall conclude that Hadrian built a Turf Wall, with forts and milecastles of some sort and the Vallum,* and that the Wall was afterwards rebuilt in stone at a period of which the stone inscriptions of the Wall certainly give us no indication. On the other hand, the Turf Wall is only two miles long : it may be an exceptional work, due to local circumstances now beyond ascertainment. The spade alone can solve the puzzle, and no quantity of guesses will profit anything.

In the preceding paragraphs I have tried to sum and estimate the contributions made during the last five years to the history of the Vallum and the Turf Wall. In doing so, I have fallen among conjectures. But even if these conjectures be as bad as conjectures usually are, the results of the excavations retain definite value. Briefly, they may be said to correct and complete existing maps and descriptions of the frontier works in many points, some important, some less important. They have revealed the the course of the Vallum in crucial places where it was either unknown or misunderstood ; they have added the line of the Turf Wall ; and they have supplied other details, singly less important, but valuable in the aggregate. The examination of the roads has considerably modified the map of Roman Cumberland. The continuation of the Stanegate down the Irthing valley and from

*The awkward manner in which the Vallum passes the south-west angle of Birdoswald fort might be excused if we assumed an earlier fort of smaller size to be contemporary with the Vallum. The fourth conclusion suggested on p. 341 also makes it desirable to put the Vallum early. But the assumptions required to explain the Turf Wall as above, are formidably numerous.

Castlesteads to Stanwix, and the continuation of the Maiden Way north of Bewcastle vanish. On the other hand the Mural road which follows the Wall, running between it and the Vallum, has been detected in a sufficient number of places to remove the doubts sometimes expressed concerning it, and other roads have been similarly confirmed. At Hawkhirst an alleged "fort" which has always puzzled enquirers, has been shewn to be no fort: at Gilsland, the earthworks at the Poltrossburn have been elucidated.

Our work has lain among details, "here a little and there a little," but the results are considerable even if the process seem dull. In particular we have simplified the map of the Roman Wall and helped to fix its main features, and this is no small advance. We may, I think, be well satisfied with the contributions to knowledge, which we have made during the last five years.