

ART. VIII.—*A Roman author in north-west Britain.*
By C. E. STEVENS, F.S.A.

Read at Lancaster, September 14th, 1949.

COMPARISONS between the later Roman empire and our own day, not always fair to either party, are in fashion to-day, and parallels are not hard to see in the centralisation of administration, the conscription and direction of labour, the "planned state" and even the subsidised fixed price with its scarcely avoidable companion, the black market. We may also call attention to that modern phenomenon, the flood of suggestions put up to departments of the Civil Service by amateur planners; for there is here, as it seems, a parallel too. The panaceas of an interested amateur of the fourth century A.D. were offered to some department of the central Roman government, seem somehow to have adhered to an official file and have strangely come down to us appended to that other mysterious document of late-Roman officialdom, the *Notitia Dignitatum*.¹ This memorandum is what is known to scholars as the *Anonymus de rebus bellicis*. It has been for one reason and another a difficult work to come by,² and it is good news that two distinguished British scholars, Professors E. A. Thompson and A. H. M. Jones, are working on a new edition with translation. In advance of their text

¹ I cannot discuss in detail the question of the *Notitia* (on which Mr Birley and I hold different views); I still maintain in substance the position I set forth in *Arch. Journ.* xcvi 125, but see note 16 below and Mr Gillam's article in *CW* 2 xlix 38-58.

² I quote from the edition of R. Schneider (1908). A collation of the Paris *MS* was published, with a long introduction, by S. Reinach in *Rev. Arch.* 5 xvi, 205-265.

of the *Anonymus* (which is going to make very good reading) I shall suggest here that the author may have had connections not only with Britain but with that part of Britain which is of special interest to our Society.

The work is a collection of hints for the improvement of conditions in the Roman empire. The majority of them are concerned with warfare, but there is also some remarkable thinking about social policy and its relation to finance and monetary theory, of which we shall have to speak later. The whole is the work of a mind strong, lively, independent and self-confident, but lacking in critical power and integrated education. It is the sort of pamphlet which tends nowadays to be labelled as crackpot, but to which the ephemeral literature of the seventeenth century can furnish many parallels. Seck dated it with much probability to some time between A.D. 366 and 378,³ that is—from the point of view of Romano-British history—to the period of reorganisation after the great disaster of A.D. 367. He noted the author's interest in the eastern frontier (Persia and Arabia), and perceived a reference to the Danube. That Britain too came into the picture he did not perceive, and indeed there is no explicit mention of it: nevertheless Camden had long ago observed that a passage in it must refer to Hadrian's Wall,⁴ and Camden's observations were resuscitated in the very year of Seck's article by that keen student of northern antiquities, Cadwallader John Bates.⁵ Among the suggestions of the *Anonymus* is that "castles should be erected at intervals of a mile along the frontiers . . . garrisoned by peasants settled at the proper distances, without any public expense, combining military with agricultural duties."⁶

Bates used the passage to show that an emperor of the

³ RE I, col. 2325.

⁴ *Britannia*, edition of 1600, 715; the point is not referred to in earlier editions.

⁵ AA2 xvi 447.

⁶ Schneider, 23.

period had actually taken the advice of our author, in other words that our Hadrian's Wall was an erection of the later empire. We cannot follow him here, but we can, instead, legitimately assert that the *Anonymus* must actually have seen or at least received an accurate account of the Wall. And there is more that modern scholarship can draw from his words. He not only demands milecastles for all the frontiers of the empire: he demands a kind of Home Guard to man them. Now there is one frontier where the existence of such soldier-peasants has been brilliantly demonstrated in a recent work, namely the frontier of Africa.⁷ There we learn of the farms, the defended emplacements and the field-systems of this peasantry, in close contact with a running work, the *fossatum Africae*, the whole system of defence in depth being styled a *limes* and its para-military defenders, *limitanei*. That they were para-military is revealed by the description of the organisation in the *Notitia*,⁸ where only the posts of the commanders of the sectors are mentioned, instead of a detailed record of forts and units in the command. It looks legitimate, then, to assert that the *Anonymus* is advocating a kind of hybrid of British and African conditions for his ideal frontier. This would be sound speculation, even if he was thinking of units of a type slightly different, administratively, from the *limitanei*.

To understand this last point a slight digression is necessary. While his own evidence is really good enough to show that a milecastle might be called in technical language a *castellum*, another word was in use which, normally denoting a watch-tower like the turrets on Hadrian's Wall, might be extended in use to mean a small fort like a milecastle. That word is *burgus*,⁹ so

⁷ Baradez, *Fossatum Africae*, 1949, 157-162.

⁸ *Not. Dig. Occ.* xxv 30-36.

⁹ That *burgus* can mean a turret is shown conclusively by ILS 2614 and O.R.L. 44, 85. But that it can also mean a small fort was demonstrated by Winckelmann in *Germania* 2, 54, now corroborated by Baradez (*op. cit.*, 235-242), who has identified the *burgi* of ILS 2636 and CIL viii 2495.

that our milecastle garrisons, as manning *burgi*, might have been called *burgarii*, a word found in inscriptions from the second century onwards. In course of time, however, the concept of the *burgarius* seems to widen and to gain a kind of sociological significance. In the legislation of the later empire the *burgarius* appears as a member of a kind of corporation, capable of holding landed property.¹⁰ In fact, the differences between his position and that of the *limitaneus* may well have been more institutional than practical. Whereas the latter takes his orders from the military hierarchy, the directives concerning *burgarii* come from civilians to civilians. *Burgarii* seem thus to be a variety of *limitanei*, less military and more civilian than the latter.

But whether it is *limitanei* or *burgarii* that he has in mind for his ideal frontier, one thing can reasonably be claimed: the garrisons of milecastles were only even *burgarii* in the literal sense of occupiers of *burgi*. For not only do we find no traces of field-systems in the vicinity of milecastles¹¹ like those associated with Housesteads fort; we find no traces of civil settlements¹² or bath-buildings. Can it be, then, that in demanding that his milecastle garrisons should resemble *limitanei* or "full-blooded" *burgarii*, the *Anonymus* was thinking of a defect in the British arrangements?¹³ In a most clever article Mr Birley gives me the hint that this may be so.¹⁴

¹⁰ See especially Seeck in RE III, col. 1066, with the legislation there cited. Labrousse (*Mel. de l'École franc. de Rome* lvi 151) collects the whole evidence, but his conception of *burgarii* seems too narrow.

¹¹ It might be argued that the site at Milking Gap (AA4 xv 303) was the civil settlement of milecastle 38 (Hotbank). But it does not seem in any event to have been occupied after the second century.

¹² Religious dedications certainly or probably from milecastles are not uncommon. I have noticed the following: CIL vii 632, 800-802, 804, 876, 886, 935, 937, 939, 940, 950; EE vii 1042, 1086; JRS xxii 224 = AA4 ix 205. The tombstone of a Pannonian (CIL vii 692) should come from milecastle 42 (Cawfields) — unless it is a "carry" from the cemetery of Greatchesters.

¹³ I may be asked what was the status of the milecastle garrisons if they were not *burgarii*. I suspect, though I have not the space to argue the point here, that they were in the main short-term local levies organised in *numeri*.

¹⁴ AA4 ix 210.

He has equated the treacherous *Areani* (or *Arcani*) of Ammianus with the milecastle garrisons. It looks, in fact, as though the *Anonymus* liked the idea of holding a frontier by milecastles and turrets in the British manner, but thought that their garrisons ought to have more of a stake in what they defended, like the contingents of the African frontier. Moreover, it is possible that the authorities listened to him—up to a point. They did not indeed adopt his suggestions for *Areani* in the milecastles; *Areani* and milecastles were abolished. I have, however, argued elsewhere¹⁵ that the use of an antiquated dossier for Hadrian's Wall in the *Notitia* is hardly explicable except on the theory that in the latest period in which the Wall was held, A.D. 369-383, its forts were occupied by para-military units not responsible to the military hierarchy, by "full-blooded" *burgarii* in fact, so that the compiler of the *Notitia*, searching for a "return" of Hadrian's Wall which would be helpful in giving real military units on it, was forced to use a dossier which was (if I may use the term which we employed in the Ministry of Economic Warfare) a very dead dossier indeed.¹⁶ Thus, during the latest period of the Wall, we see in immediate contact with the Pictish enemy the *gentiles* in friendly relations with Rome,¹⁷ behind them the para-military units in the Wall forts, and behind them again the regular troops. The African parallel is here again instructive, especially in respect of the relations between the *gentiles* and the formations immediately in their rear on the *fossatum*.¹⁸ In fact,

¹⁵ *Arch. Journ.* xcvi 148.

¹⁶ Mr Gillam has pointed out to me that the "dead dossier" cannot be the latest "return" in which the Wall forts were shown as garrisoned by regular troops (unless the institution of *burgarii* in Britain dates from Diocletian), but must go back to third-century arrangements (see CW2 xlix 38-58). I see nothing against clerks who were citing dossiers "dead" anyway, pulling out something older than the most recent one (and one perhaps gnawed by mice around Camboglanna).

¹⁷ Cf. Peter Hunter Blair in AA4 xxv 20.

¹⁸ Baradez, *op. cit.*, 158-159, elucidating *cod. Theod.* vii 15, 1.

if my picture is correct, the last period on Hadrian's Wall shows a final and most interesting stage in the development of military doctrine as affecting frontier defence.

Apart from this very clear hint, there are others more or less plausible to show the British interests of our author. Among the most curious is his design for a paddle-driven ship with three pairs of wheels, each pair driven by a pair of oxen turning a sort of capstan on deck.¹⁹ It does not seem very practical, but it is worth thinking about possible sources. The paddle-wheel (of which it seems that he can claim to be the inventor²⁰) should derive from the under-shot water-mill and the capstan from the donkey-mill, so that the invention is really the combination of two types of mill.²¹ Donkey-mills were not common in northern Europe, though one is known from London²²—and we must not forget those curious circular chambers at Chesterholm fort.²³ But water-mills, if our archaeological and other evidence is worth anything,²⁴ were far from common objects up and down the empire: still, more than one could have been seen working along the line of Hadrian's Wall.²⁵

And finally there are his monetary theories. He is convinced that a principal cause of the empire's misfortunes is the release of gold in large quantities, resulting from Constantine's spoliation of the temples²⁶—a curious parallel to the social effects of the opening of America in

¹⁹ Schneider, 20.

²⁰ On the history of the paddle-wheel see Horwitz, *Zeitschr. des Oesterreich. Ingenieur- und Architektenvereins* lxxxii 309 (a reference for which I have to thank the authorities of the Science Museum).

²¹ I owe this point to Professor E. A. Thompson.

²² *Antiq. Journ.* ix 220.

²³ AA4 xiii 238.

²⁴ *Cambridge Economic History* i 95.

²⁵ *Handbook to the Roman Wall*, 10th ed. (1947) 80, 147, 166.

²⁶ On Constantine's looting of temples see Piganiol, *L'Empereur Constantin*, 165; and it is true that from now gold begins to become common once more. His sons continued the practice, and it is remarkable that Firmicus Maternus (28, 6-7) brings the British expedition of Constans (A.D. 343) into close connection with his spoliation of temples. Had the *Anonymus* read Firmicus?

the sixteenth century, as argued by modern historians. "From this glut of gold", he writes,²⁷ "the private mansions of the rich were filled, which increased in renown to the destruction of the poor, and the lower classes were subject to violent oppression. The ruined poor, excited to every manner of crime, preserving no reverence for law or respect for tradition, sought revenge in criminal activities. They exposed the empire to crippling losses by ravaging the fields, putting an end to peaceful conditions by brigandage and the enflaming of hatreds. Their criminality grew to the encouragement of pretenders (*tyranni*), though the presumption of these last served less in fact to encourage their followers than to serve as a field for the glory of the legitimate emperor" (i.e. Valentinian I?).

At first sight it might appear that this picture would fit any province anywhere in the later Roman empire²⁸; indeed, the picture of brigandage is very reminiscent of Gaul a generation later.²⁹ We happen, however, to learn from the specific testimony of Ammianus³⁰ that in this period there were only three areas in which these social maladies were prominent: Illyricum, Africa and Britain, and only Africa and Britain produced usurpers. We know that the African pretender, Firmus, was supported by the local population, for another African, St. Augustine, tells us so.³¹ But the narrative of Ammianus makes clear that in A.D. 367 and after the troubles in Britain, which culminated in the appearance of a pretender, Valentinus, had their origin here too as much in domestic troubles as in foreign invasion.³²

²⁷ Schneider, 7.

²⁸ All bad governors, of course, tend to behave in much the same way; still, it is remarkable how similar the picture in Schneider, 8, is to that of misgovernment in Britain given by Libanius, *Or.* xviii 81.

²⁹ See Thompson, *Attila and the Huns* (1948), 68-70.

³⁰ Amm. Marc. xxx 9, 1.

³¹ Passages cited in Seock, *Untergang der antiken Welt*, v 435.

³² Amm. Marc. xxviii 3, 3-6; xxx 7, 10 and 9, 1. Foord, *The Last Age of Roman Britain*, 85, puts this point well.

And there may be a detail which localises his thinking not only to Britain but to our own district. Our author supports his monetary theory by some remarkable monetary history, if it be not rather monetary myth. In primitive times, he tells us,³³ men used gold and silver only for adorning town walls, though bronze was also used for statues. For money they first used terra cotta roundels stamped with portraits, and later, leather coins with the portrait slightly embossed in gold. At a later date bronze was still used indeed for statues, but kings now made them out of gold and silver, and bronze (which had in the meantime become far more common) began to be used for coinage. He gives pictures of the bronze money and the terra cotta roundels, both with male portraits, but his leather money seems to be merely a disc with some sort of tab. His observations seem to derive from a theory of monetary origins as old as Suetonius in the second century,³⁴ and it is fair to say that he does not advocate outright the return to fiduciary money of this type. Nevertheless, when he mentions that in the past such fiduciary issues enabled kings to indulge their prodigality without burdening their subjects, it is difficult not to think that he had in mind the possibilities of a coinage of these materials. And if we look for actual examples of the use of leather for money, we do have a record, faint though it be, from Britain itself. It is contained in that account of the fort at Low Borrow Bridge which Mr Birley has re-published from the files of an old local newspaper³⁵: "Tradition says, that at this place were formerly found a number of small pieces of stamped leather, which are supposed to have been a kind of current coin." Not strong evidence, certainly, but the newspaper account is a shrewd one,

³³ Schneider, 6.

³⁴ See Reinach, *op. cit.*, 216 and Granlund, *Nordisk Numismatik Aarskift* 8, 1947, n. 16a.

³⁵ CW2 xlvi 3. Mr Birley has noticed the leather coins of the *Anonymus* in conversation with me.

and if there is anything at all in the tradition, here is the *Anonymus* with his stamped leather money all over. It is really tempting to imagine him seeing, perhaps, the temporary expedient of an ingenious unit-commander during the troubles of A.D. 367, when the pay-chest failed to arrive, connecting this with an old theory of money which was running in his head—and imagining the panacea for the whole empire of a leather coinage.

Thus the picture of a personality from the fourth century A.D. emerges. He is a soldier, and one who has moved around the empire, thus a member of the field-army, the *comitatenses*; a man probably from the Greek-speaking eastern provinces of the empire, as he does not seem—as Seeck pointed out³⁶—to handle Latin as his mother-tongue: just such a man, in fact, as the historian Ammianus himself.³⁷ Our *Anonymus* knows the eastern frontier, and could have known it from the campaigns of Julian or from any of the many other campaigns of the fourth century. But when we collate his knowledge of the western provinces, a curious point seems to emerge. We have this British connection, we have the knowledge of the Danube, and we have the hint that he derives some of his ideas from conditions in Africa. If we are looking for a soldier who has fought with field armies in these three areas, we can hardly find one elsewhere than in the entourage of Count Theodosius himself.³⁸ As Ammianus accompanied the great general of the time, Ursicinus,³⁹ around the empire, so we may see our author on the staff of the general of the next decade. He fights at his side in the British campaign, learning lessons, civil and military, from the rebellion — and even watching, we may like to think, the financial wizardry of a hard-pressed fort-commander in our own district. The list

³⁶ RE I, col. 2326.

³⁷ Thompson, *Ammianus Marcellinus* (1947), 3-6.

³⁸ On Count Theodosius see Egger in *Byzantion* v 13, where he publishes an interesting inscription in which Britain is mentioned (RE V A, col. 1939).

³⁹ Thompson, *loc. cit.*

of ancient authors who visited Britain is not a long one: Pytheas, Caesar, Frontinus, Juvenal (perhaps), Demetrius of Tarsus. But they are all interesting people. I shall be glad if I am deemed to have succeeded in adding the personality (we do not know the name⁴⁰) of another, as interesting in his way as these.

⁴⁰ Could it be Ammianus himself? There are obvious difficulties (though I think that they could be surmounted), and his career is somewhat mysterious in any case after A.D. 363 (Thompson, *op. cit.*, 12). Stylistic considerations may be decisive, but certainly these two stand head and shoulders above contemporary laymen for originality of mind. I have the feeling — and the hope — that they were one and the same person. We may note that he wishes his 'Wall with milecastles and turrets' to be erected 'without public expenditure by landowners working on sectors assigned to them' (Schneider, 23). If the inscriptions of the *civitates* and Vindomorucius are assignable to the Theodosian rebuild, as I have argued in *Eng. Hist. Rev.* lvi 359, we can say that this was actually done; and it is perfectly in accord with fourth-century practice, as Seeck (*op. cit.*, ii 287, 556) has shown.