

DERBYSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY.

MELANDRA CASTLE EXCAVATIONS 1958.

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GARSTANG'S work on the east gateway of Melandra Castle in 1899 did not determine with certainty the nature of the superstructure. The foundations he uncovered did not obviously suggest flanking towers each with a chamber at ground level. A second question his unfinished work left open was whether the two passageways were of equal width.¹ Bruton's account of the fort gives plans of the north, east and south gateways but not one of the west gateway as it was "constantly under water".² The south gateway had one passageway only, whatever the nature of the superstructure. The north, east and west gateways each had two passageways of equal width. Though he then believed that there were flanking towers Bruton left open the question of whether they had ground-floor chambers.³ Later, relying on evidence from Elslack, he concluded that "the existence of guard chambers at Melandra may now be considered doubtful".⁴ In the series of excavations conducted by the Excavations Sub-committee of the Manchester Branch of the Classical Association in the years 1936 to 1938 the gateways were not re-examined.⁵

The Sub-committee's work on the site of Roman Manchester in the years following the Second World War

¹ *D.A.J.*, XXIII (1901), 90-98; cf. *Trans. Hist. Soc. of Lancs. and Chesh.* LII (1900), III-26.

² *Melandra Castle*, ed. R. S. Conway (Manchester, 1906), 39.

³ *Melandra Castle*, 36.

⁴ *Excavations at Toothill and Melandra*, Second annual report of the Manchester Branch of the Classical Association, supplementary vol., ed. F. A. Bruton (Manchester, 1909), 32.

⁵ *D.A.J.*, LXIV (1943), 49-63.

suggested that a gatehouse type of fort entrance, as contrasted with an entrance flanked by towers, may have been more common than had been thought.⁶ It was therefore decided to resume work at Melandra in 1958 in an attempt to learn more about the plan of the west gateway and at the same time to look for further traces of the wooden structures which preceded the stone gateways.⁷ The work was begun on Monday 25 August and was continued through to Monday 1 September. In view of the generally dismal weather which prevailed that year it is worth recording that during these eight days the work was never interrupted by rain and for the most part was done in brilliant sunshine. The Sub-committee's funds were sufficient to engage one paid workman but the uncovering of the west and the south gateways was done wholly by volunteers of whom the following especially merit mention: Mrs Bradley, Martin Duckworth, Mr and Mrs Gee, Mr Hodgson, Mrs Hussell and her son, Martin Taylor, Tom and Stephen Upritchard, Mr Webb and his son, and Mr Wilson. Their work raised so much local interest that it should be possible in 1959 and subsequent years to undertake further work which may not only provide more knowledge of the fort but also result in tidying away some of the unsightly scars left by the work done in the early years of the century and by more recent sporadic "treasure-hunting". Mr A. H. Ball has filled some of the gaps in the photographic record of the site and to him are due the photographs used for the Plates. The Borough Engineer's Department in Glossop was most helpful. Acknowledgements are also due to the Minister of Works for permission to excavate on a scheduled site and not least to the owner, Mr J. Gould, for his consent and interest.

THE WOODEN FORT.

The most promising places in which to look for traces of the early gateways appeared to be the eastern half of the north gateway, almost blank in the plan in *Melandra Castle*, and secondly the west gateway, the remains of

⁶ *Trans. Lancs. and Chesh. Antiq. Soc.*, LXVI (1956), 29-37.

⁷ *D.A.J.*, XXX (1908), 319-23; cf. *Toothill and Melandra*, 29.

which Bruton reported to be "broken and fragmentary".⁸ In the event the remains of the eastern half of the north gateway proved to be rather more substantial than the plan might suggest and no more wooden structural remains were found in the part of the area which was examined. As for the west gateway the remains when once again uncovered proved to be for the immediate purpose in view disappointingly substantial. If the details of the plan of a wooden gateway are to be sought for, the surviving foundations of the later stone gateway may suffer. The only evidence of a wooden period that was found here in 1958 consisted of a thick layer of decayed wood at a low level along the east face of the footings of the northern half of the stone structure. The layer may be compared with the deposit found at the north gateway though this was stated to be of burnt wood.⁹ Decayed wood found in 1958 at the south gateway where the foundations of the west passage wall abut against the earth bank of the rampart probably represents the timber float for the rampart.

THE STONE FORT.

(a) *The west gateway.*

Plate Ia (*cf.* plan, Fig. 1) gives a general view of the remains of the northern half which lay under only a few inches of soil. Had it not been known to be the case, it would have been obvious that others had been before us and not one sherd of pottery or any other artifact of Roman origin was noticed. For the most part the remains comprised thin slabs of stone on footings of cobbles in clay but there was a single row of dressed masonry along the eastern edge. The authenticity of the two dressed stones in line at right angles to this row is dubious but they were left as uncovered. The irregular nature of the footings is shown in the section (Fig. 1); little levelling of the slope of the hillside can have been done before the footings were put in and this may explain the presence of the large square blocks at the north end of the section.

While some of the stone slabs lay more or less at

⁸ *Melandra Castle*, 38-9.

⁹ *Melandra Castle*, 26.

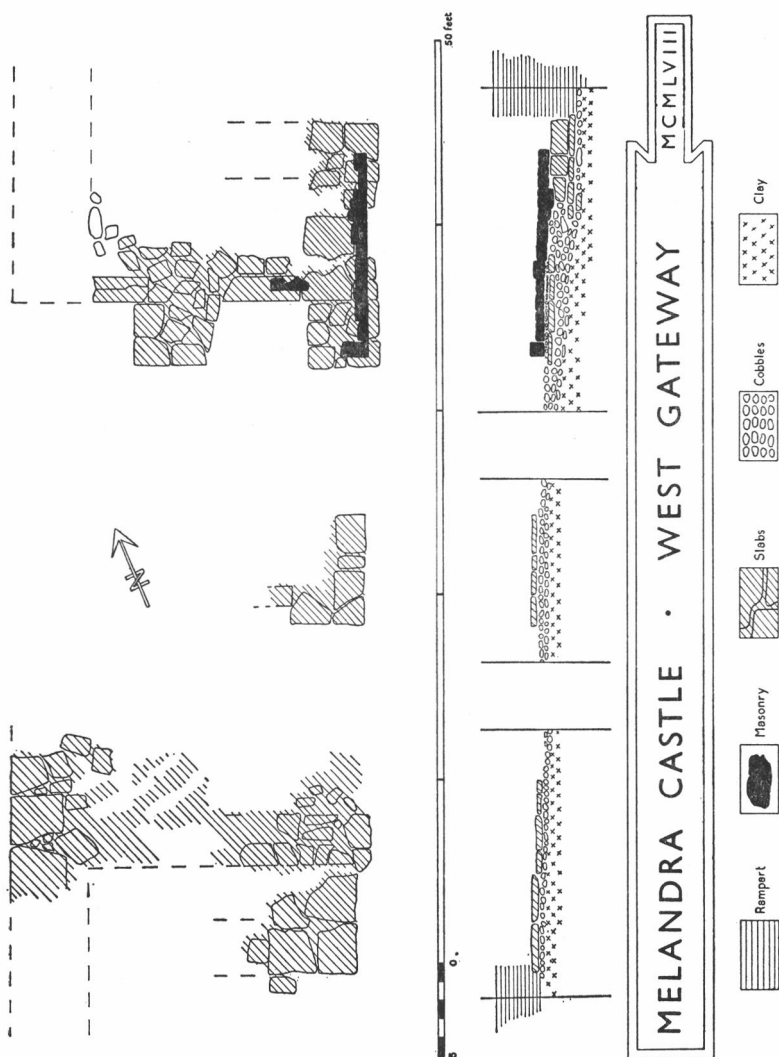


FIG. 1. Melandra Castle — the west gateway. Plan and section.

haphazard a regular line of straight-edged slabs gave the position of the north passage wall. At the outer corner where this wall joined the fort wall even the stone slabs as well as dressed masonry above them had been robbed. The line of the fort wall is known from remains to the south of the gateway but at this point there is now a wet sandy mass, with a rather unpleasant smell, which presumably had accumulated here when the earth rampart was no longer held in place by the wall of the fort and the superstructure of the gateway. Two projections into the passageway from this straight line indicate the bases of piers for an inner and an outer arch carrying the first floor of the superstructure. The slabs of the inner base were not bonded in with the slabs carrying the passage wall and the outer base was only rudely bonded in, but this hardly justifies seeing two periods of construction.

The area of the northern half of the gateway was only partly covered with stone slabs and some of them lay irregularly. There was however over the area a layer of cobbles, some of them large. At the north-east corner three substantial squared blocks of stone suggested a corner (Plate Ia, rear ranging-rod; cf. plan, Fig. 1). But of a return wall at this point running parallel to the passage wall, as on the *Melandra Castle* plans of the east and north gateways, the only traces were scanty remains of clay and cobble footings with some perished mortar.

To draw off the standing water from the southern half of the gateway one of the fort ditches was used as a soak-away — only the general position of the ditch was located and it was not examined.¹⁰ The remains found under the slime and silt resembled those of the northern half but there was no dressed masonry. The stone slabbing rested on cobbles and clay and the natural slope of the hillside had not been dug away to allow the foundations of the southern half to be laid at the same level as those of the northern half. Of the fort wall no dressed masonry remained *in situ* but the outer or western edge of the slabs corresponded with the line of the outer face of the

¹⁰ D.A.J., LXIV (1943), plan. Indications of the outermost ditch are visible in the side of the sand-pit to the north-west of the west gate and Mr J. Gould informs me that a "spearhead" has been found there.

fort wall. Traces of two piers projecting into the southern passageway were recognizable.

In the last hours available in 1958 what appeared to be remains of the central pier were found. If an irregularity of some few inches in the laying out of the foundations is ignored, the north and south passageways appear to have been of the same width.

(b) *The south gateway.*

An inch or two of soil had accumulated over the foundations since they were uncovered in 1905. The passage walls were cleared (Plate Ib) and then covered again with material from the earlier spoil heaps. Bruton gives "about 10 ft." as the width of the passageway.¹¹ At the outer end the distance between the footings on either side is 10 ft. 3 ins. but here the dressed masonry projects 6 ins. beyond the general line of the eastern passage wall. No evidence remains of a similar projection from the western passage wall; if there was one, it would hardly overhang the edge of the footings as the plan in *Melandra Castle* suggests. Plate Ib shows that within the angle formed by the east passage wall and the wall of the fort undressed stones were tightly packed and apparently *in situ*, though the plan is marked "no remains of core". If this packing represents the core of the passage wall, the wall itself must have been so thick that any ground-floor chamber was very exiguous; if it represents the packing beneath a stone floor, its top surface was so irregular that any level floor over it must have been appreciably higher than the surface of the roadway.

(c) *The north gateway.*

The site of the eastern half of the north gateway was found to be covered with stone slabs 15 ins. above the natural clay, the intervening space being packed with boulders and large cobbles, some of the latter 15 ins. in cross section. This material seems to have been dumped on the slope of the hillside to give a level terrace to carry the gateway. Similar stone bottoming 6 ft. in width continued eastward under the site of the fort wall. The

¹¹ *Melandra Castle*, 36.



PLATE Ia. Melandra Castle — the west gateway, north side.

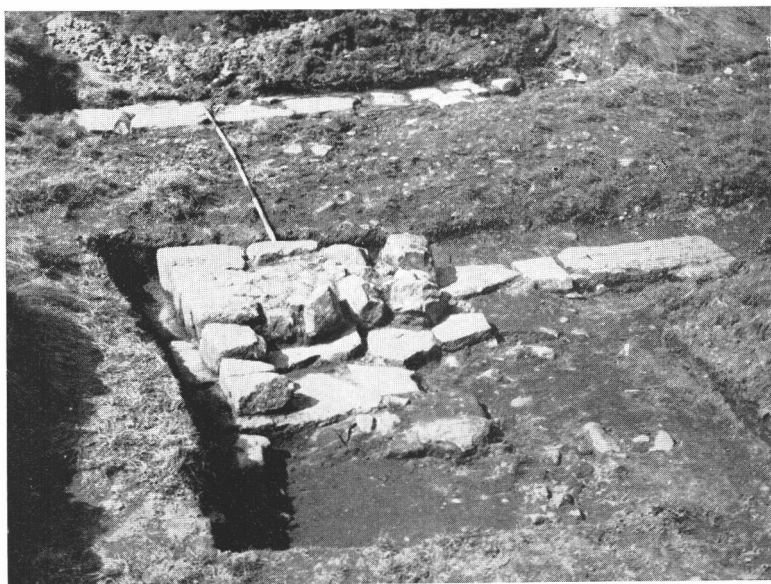


PLATE Ib. Melandra Castle — the south gateway.

over-all width of the two entrances together was 21 ft. 6 ins. between the footings of the projecting piers. The roadway consisted of 8 to 9 ins. of tightly packed gravel and small cobbles with sporadic but heavy deposits of iron pan. A black layer beneath the road metal represented the original surface of the hillside.

(d) The extra-mural building.

The supplementary report on Melandra published by the Manchester Branch of the Classical Association contains a brief notice of the uncovering of "well preserved foundations of a small square building, paved with flags" outside and just to the east of the north gateway.¹² No evidence of its date is recorded and no plan was published. It seems to have been assumed that the building was Roman. The remains have suffered since they were uncovered. The surviving footings certainly contain dressed Roman stones but some of the wedge-shaped blocks were built in with the outer face downwards. The east wall rests on 2 to 3 ins. of humus with a layer of sand below, and below this again is a layer of small cobbles 6 to 8 ins. thick, seemingly a road along the berm from the north gateway. The erection of the building must therefore have taken place at some time after the roadway had fallen into disuse. In 1958 no pottery or other evidence of date was found. If it is Roman, the building seems to be later than the period of the occupation of the fort; at present there is no evidence that it is Roman.

SUMMARY.

The work in 1958 was undertaken in order to estimate the possibilities of excavation on a more extended scale in subsequent years. The results suggest that search for traces of wooden gateways will be difficult and may involve disturbance of masonry remains which, though ruinous, are of interest. Work on any of the key points of the plan of the fort will be handicapped by old spoil heaps, now very hard to remove. Local enthusiasm may surmount the difficulty of the work; the desirability of

¹² *Toothill and Melandra*, 25.

an extensive tidying-up of the site is undeniable if the labour to carry it through can be found. In the meantime, to offset the doubt cast upon the Roman origin of the extra-mural building at the north gate, some knowledge of the west gateway has been added to the record.