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INTERIM REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS AT THE ROMAN FORT OF RUDCHESTER, 1972

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IN the spring of 1972 an excavation was undertaken in the Roman fort at Rudchester, on Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland. The work was directed by Professor R. M. Harrison and Mr. J. P. Gillam for the Newcastle University Committee for Excavation and Fieldwork. The excavation was used as a training course for undergraduates and graduates of Newcastle University, who formed the greater part of the labour force. Permission was generously given by Mr. James, the owner of the land, and Mr. Stobo the farmer. Mr. Benson, formerly of Rudchester, helped to make the arrangements.

The excavation was by way of a reconnaissance, in preparation, should this prove possible, for work on a larger scale in later and successive seasons. An area of 42 sq. m in the south eastern part of the fort, on the south edge of the *via quintana*, the east to west road which runs along the south side of the central range of buildings, was uncovered. The area was stripped either to subsoil, or to surviving substantial structures. The earlier excavators had investigated gates, and buildings in the central range.¹ Nothing had however been learned about the barracks, which, though less impressive, are often a better source of information about both the planning and the history of a fort.

Some 4 m of the width of the *via quintana* were uncovered. It was composed mainly of broken limestone, closely compacted, to a thickness of 0.4 m. This material was removed only in a single trench, to investigate the marks of early ploughing in the subsoil, after similar marks had been observed to the south. Mr. T. G. Newman contributes an account of these.

South of the *via quintana*, parts of three successive structures were observed, two certainly barracks. A layer of pale yellow-orange mason's chippings, varying in thickness, overlay the fossil pre-Roman topsoil, which in turn overlay the plough-scored sub-soil. The chippings had evidently been deposited during the construction of the first Roman building on the site. This was represented by an ashlar wall, running east and west on the south edge of the *via quintana*. Marked on the plan as Period I, it is almost certainly of Hadrianic date, and is the north wall of a barrack block aligned east and west. Internal subdivisions are represented by a shallow north to south trench, on the east side

¹ *A.A.A.*, I, 1925; pp. 93-121 (Parker Brewis).

of the excavation, directly below a later stone wall. The shallowness of the trench suggests that it had probably once held a sleeper, similar to those in the fort of Period I B at Corbridge, and unlike the more usual deep post-trenches.² No trace was found of a second partition, in the thoroughly cleaned subsoil, between the first partition and a north to south stone wall on the west side of the excavation. A second partition almost certainly underlay this stone wall. If this was so, the *contubernium*, or barrack room, was 4.00 m (13.5 Roman ft) wide, measured over one wall. Rudchester fort is 117 m (396 Roman ft) wide, that is 36 Roman ft narrower than Benwell or Haltonchesters, its nearest neighbours on the Wall. This suggests a somewhat shorter barrack than usual, with a group of *contubernia* some 110 Roman ft long. While certainty is impossible at this stage, it would seem that there were probably eight *contubernia*, a number more appropriate for two cavalry sub-units than for one infantry sub-unit. The fort may then have held an *ala quingenaria*, as has been suggested, or a *cohors quingenaria equitata*. These are the only possibilities. The relatively small size of the fort would favour the second and smaller unit.

The first barrack was burnt down. The evidence for this was varied; it included pottery, both samian and coarse, oxidised or reduced by fire, charred wood, both wattles and floor planks, fired daub, and window glass softened and distorted by heat. The latest piece of burnt decorated samian was in the style of ALBUCIUS of Central Gaul, a mid-Antonine potter. No artefact of later date of emergence was found at this level. If the fire happened at one of the points in time for which literary or other evidence suggests widespread destruction, then it might have been in A.D. 180, A.D. 197 or A.D. 207. The evidence from Rudchester does not dictate a choice, but A.D. 180 is not ruled out by the finds.

The rebuilt barrack, Period II on the plan, whether the work of Commodus, Severus or Caracalla, followed the same lines as its predecessor. The partitions were replaced by stone walls which are not bonded with the outside wall; after repair, this continued to serve in Period II, as in Period I. The barrack was clearly of the same type in both periods, and this implies a similar unit. At some date which cannot be precisely ascertained, the rebuilt ashlar barrack fell into ruin and was never again rebuilt. A layer of humus overlay its remains, reminiscent of a similar layer at Haltonchesters,³ and compelling reference to an inscription of the beginning of the fourth century, from Birdoswald,⁴ which speaks of the restoration of the commander's house which had been covered with earth and had fallen into ruin.

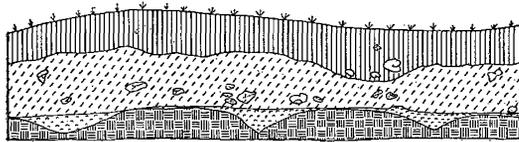
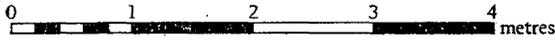
A single stone, 0.7 by 0.3 m, undisturbed by medieval or pre-enclosure ploughing, though scored by it, lay, on a north to south axis, close to and parallel with the western partition of Period II. It had two sockets for tenons on its upper face, and closely resembled many stones at Haltonchesters, which

² A.A.⁴, XLIX, 1971; p. 10 (J. P. Gillam).

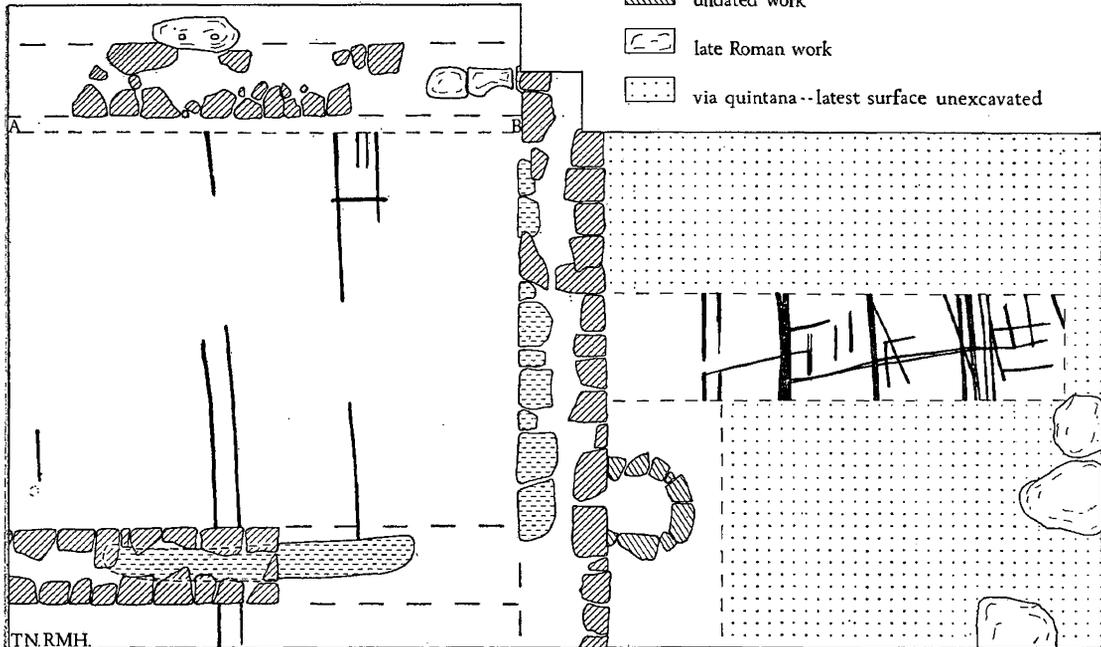
⁴ R.I.B., 1912.

³ J.R.S., LII, 1962; p. 164.

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- topsoil--rig-and-furrow
- dark earth and rubble
- masons' chippings
- plough-soil
- period I work
- period II work
- undated work
- late Roman work
- via quintana--latest surface unexcavated



had formed the substructure of buildings, securely dated to the last third of the fourth century. There can be little doubt that the stone at Rudchester was the sole survivor of such a structure, and of approximately the same date. A relatively large quantity of Crambeck and Huntcliff wares were found, mainly unstratified.

Outside, and in contact with, the south wall of the barrack of Period I and II, was a small stone-lined sump, horse-shoe-shaped in plan. Neither its precise date nor its precise purpose was ascertained.

So far as it goes, this small sample of the evidence obtainable at Rudchester suggests that the history of the fort was closely parallel with that at Halton-

chesters, and markedly different from the known or inferred history of other forts on the Wall. Built under Hadrian, presumably for a *cohors quingenaria equitata*, the fort, or at least part of it, was burnt down at a date which need not be later than the early 180s. Rebuilt, possibly under Commodus, it was subsequently abandoned, with no evidence to show that this was as a result of violence. The abandonment might have come before the end of the third century. Re-occupation and re-building came late in the fourth century, possibly *c.* A.D. 370, and the fort then continued in occupation for a considerable time.

THE PLOUGH-MARKS

Plough-marks were noticed in the clay sub-soil beneath both barrack-block and the *via quintana* of the Roman fort. Three ploughing directions were discernible: approximately east-west, north-south and east-north-east to west-south-west. Of these, the east-west markings were by far the most numerous, and the clearest. The marks varied in thickness from 10 mm to 30 mm, with in addition at least one of 50 mm thickness, which appeared to be the result of two plough-marks partially coinciding. The distance between the marks seems originally to have averaged about 50 mm, but there are many gaps in the pattern, and some of the marks are discontinuous, which may be the result of the plough not penetrating through the topsoil in all places.

Immediately above the clay subsoil was a layer of dark earth, rich in humus, which must be identified as plough-soil. Although the surface of the subsoil was virtually flat, the upper surface of the plough-soil formed series of undulations, similar to medieval rig-and-furrow, and running east-west. This feature was apparent under both the Roman barrack-block and the road. The distance from rig crest to rig crest was in all cases very close to 1.5 m, and the average depth of plough-soil varies from 50 mm in the furrows to a maximum of 1.25 m. There was no indication of a turf-line intervening between the ploughing and the construction of the fort, whose walls, of course, did cut into the plough-soil. On the other hand, the rigs must have been fairly well compacted, or they would have been obliterated during construction of the fort.

The conclusion seems inescapable that the land beneath this part of Rudchester fort was under cultivation up to the time of the building of Hadrian's Wall, and possibly even until the fort was built. The ploughing which created the east-west plough-marks would seem also to have given rise to the plough-rigs: they are certainly on the same alignment. The existence of the plough-rigs must rule out any possibility that cross-ploughing is represented here, and this is further borne out by the differing states of preservation of plough-marks in the different directions. Use of a heavy plough is indicated, which must have had a mould-board in order to throw up a rig: it must therefore also have had a share, and presumably also a coulter, which was respon-

sible for the marks seen on the subsoil surface—they are somewhat narrow to have been made by a share.

Cross-ploughing is thus ruled out—but so is a permanent rig-and-furrow system: firstly, the undulation in the plough-soil surface is not repeated in the subsoil surface as is the case with medieval rig-and-furrow; secondly, the plough-marks follow three different directions. Thus the plough-rigs were short-lived, lasting for a few years, or possibly only one year; after which time a new ploughing direction was chosen, the old rigs obliterated, and new ones created. This would not be nearly so laborious a task as on a medieval field, for the rigs are on a much smaller scale. Nevertheless, it would require a conscious decision to create and destroy the rigs, for it was perfectly possible to plough to a level surface. What agricultural or social purpose such a process served is at the moment impossible to suggest.

Plough-marks have also been noted on a clay subsoil in Northumberland (but not elsewhere in Britain) beneath the Roman forts at Carrawburgh⁵ and Halton Chesters,⁶ and beneath a Roman road at Walker.⁷ Carrawburgh plough-marks may well bear a similar interpretation to those at Rudchester: the overwhelming majority were seen to run north-south, with a very few running east-west. The rig formation was not apparent there, but the plough-soil had been disturbed by the digging of a ditched enclosure after the ploughing had ceased, but prior to the fort construction. At Halton Chesters unfortunately, not enough of the plough-marks were observable to allow of any comment, and the same must apply at Stott's House "Tumulus", Walker, where the excavator felt that the plough-marks could be the result of either cross-ploughing, or of ploughing on two separate occasions, in different directions.

At all events, we now have four sites where ploughing on heavy clay soil can be shown to ante-date the Hadrianic frontier, and where the plough-marks were preserved by the accident of being covered by Roman works. It may thus be suggested that arable farming was practised in the immediately pre-Roman period over a wide range of territory in Northumberland, and on soil which has generally been regarded as uninviting to the iron-age farmer. This is something which should be taken into account when considering the possible density of iron-age and Romano-British population, not only in Northumberland, but also, perhaps, in the clay areas of the Midlands.

⁵ *A.A.*⁴, L, 1972; pp. 81-144 (D. J. Breeze).

⁶ Observed and recorded by J. P. Gillam.

⁷ *A.A.*⁴, XLIII, 1965; pp. 77-86 (G. Jobey).

