

THE VALLUM: A SUGGESTION.

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Many theories have been propounded with regard to the Vallum, as the earthworks which lie at the back of Hadrian's Wall are usually called. None of the current theories, however, is entirely satisfactory, and no harm can be done by adding another to the list.

I was at Corbridge when the war began, and heard a good deal of what was happening on Tyneside and thereabouts. A large force of recently-embodied Territorials was quartered near the mouth of the Tyne, and for some time they were engaged in constructing coast-defence earthworks of considerable size and extent—these were ostensibly designed to prevent invasion by a German raiding force, but there is no doubt that their real purpose was to get the men into hard physical condition; nor could any better way of attaining that object have been found.

The suggestion here put forward is that the Vallum served a similar purpose in connexion with the garrison of the Roman Wall, that the ditch was dug and the earthworks thrown up, not as a single operation, like the building of the Wall, but gradually and systematically, not so much to get the men into hard condition, as to keep them so continuously.

Something of the kind must have been needed: a 'fit' man cannot be idle and retain his fitness; and the garrisons of the Wall forts might at any moment have been called on to do work which would be a severe test of their strength and powers of endurance. Ordinary drill and sentry-go would not have been sufficient; route-marching can hardly have been practicable to any great

extent ; but a regular system of pick-and-shovel exercise would meet every requirement, and it could be carried out close to the quarters of each particular troop.

If this theory be correct, the Vallum becomes a comparatively unimportant work. Its main usefulness lay in the labour which its construction involved, and it has probably been left incomplete, at any rate in some places. It is not necessary to suppose that the suggested system of exercise was kept up for a long period ; possibly it came to an end when the frontier was advanced in A.D. 140. Nor is this theory inconsistent with others. The Vallum may have been laid out with a general idea that it might prove useful in case of an attack from the south, and it may in practice have served as a civil ' limes ' ; but its main object would be the provision of physical work for the troops, and for that it was admirably adapted. The great ditch through the basalt at Limestone Bank must have given the men that made it—probably the ' Cohors I Batavorum ' of Procolitia—an immense amount of exercise, even though the work was not so extraordinary as some have imagined. Prismatic basalt has natural joints, horizontally as well as vertically ; no special skill would be needed for quarrying it, and the principal work must have been the removal of large fragments, a matter of ropes, planks, rollers and adequate man-power. At Corbridge the large Calpurnius Agricola slab, weighing about 18 hundredweight, was brought up out of a hole nearly six feet deep in a couple of minutes by a team of thirty men. With similar tackle and plenty of time a single ' centuria ' of the First Batavians could have raised the largest fragment that remains at Limestone Bank, and the exercise would have been as good as digging.

At any rate this theory will explain some facts and features which do not readily fit in with any other. The late Mr. J. P. Gibson, F.S.A. claimed to have found places where there were gaps in the Vallum. If this be so, the theory here put forward explains their occurrence : indeed, they are just what we should expect to find. It also explains the shape of the ditch, which, being flat-bottomed, and not a ' fossa fastigata ' or V-shaped cutting, would give room for a double line of workers. The

lip-mound, which generally occurs on the southern edge of the ditch, but sometimes on the north side, becomes not part of the design, but merely the last remnant of the earth cast up from the ditch, the rest having been shovelled back to form the north or south mound, as the case may be. If the Vallum was not of first-rate importance, except as a means of exercising the troops, the removal of this earth would be left to the last, and the existence of the lip-mound may be evidence of the incomplete state in which the work was left.