

### III: Chester

#### Early Roman Occupation

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It has been demonstrated that the evidence of Roman coin loss can make a significant contribution to our understanding of the pattern of military conquest and occupation in north-west England (Shotter 1993; 2000a). In particular it has proved possible, in cases where the coin sample is of sufficient size, to distinguish between sites whose initial establishment was pre-Agricolan, Agricolan, or post-Agricolan (Jones 1968; Shotter 2001). Over the years it has been postulated that Quintus Petillius Cerialis, Vespasian's son-in-law and governor of Britain from AD 71 to 74 (Birley 1973), may have made a greater impact on northern Britain than has traditionally been appreciated.

The purpose of the present paper is to develop further the arguments about early Roman military activity and, in particular, to examine the possible role of Chester in it. The pattern of Roman coin issue in the first century AD is especially helpful: the emperor Vespasian (AD 69–79) reorganised minting activities and, almost for the first time, ensured a supply of coins to meet demand. Pre-Flavian coinage, especially *aes* denominations, was more erratic in its appearance: in particular, local copying of the *aes* of Claudius was tolerated to ensure sufficient supplies, and such coins, which were often of poor quality (Sutherland 1937), circulated relatively freely in the reigns of Claudius and Nero, but are rarely found in assemblages of Flavian date. To a large extent, the same happened also to regular Julio-Claudian *aes* issues. The presence of such coins, therefore, becomes a guide to likely areas of pre-Flavian military activity. Further, Vespasian's reign saw two years of heavy coin issue, AD 71 and 77/8, and it seems reasonable to suppose that sites with a heavy representation of *aes* issues of 71 should be regarded *prima facie* as likely to have been established during the governorship of Petillius Cerialis.

A study of Roman coin loss in the north-west counties (Shotter 1994) has revealed that a considerable number of pre-Flavian *aes* issues has been retrieved from coastal and river valley locations and that Chester itself has yielded some (Ills III.1, 2). We know from the accounts of the Roman historian P Cornelius Tacitus (*Annals* XII, 31–40; *Histories* III, 45) that although Rome early on established a treaty relationship with Cartimandua of the Brigantes, factional squabbling in the 50s and 60s between her and her husband and rival Venutius threatened to destabilise the north-west; this culminated in the triumph of Venutius in 69, thus necessitating the 'rescue' of Cartimandua, perhaps from a centre at Barwick in Elmet (near Leeds; Carrington 1985). Tacitus makes it clear that such



III III.1 Find spots of pre-Neronian aes coins: map.

squabbling necessitated a Roman response, which evidently came in the form of ‘search-and-destroy’ missions, but which did not lead at the time to permanent military occupation; the physical evidence of such activities, therefore, would have existed in the form of campaign camps which, on low ground at least, will have proved vulnerable to subsequent agricultural activity. However, sites such as Mastiles Lane (Malham Moor) might conceivably be relics of this period of campaigning.

The distribution of the early coin types described above suggests that the Roman army on these occasions set up ‘combined operations’ of a type evidently used again by Agricola in Scotland in the early 80s (Tacitus, *Agricola*, 25; Hanson 1987, 175). Troops worked overland from bases such as Wroxeter and Little Chester, penetrating into the north-west along the line of King Street through Middlewich, crossing the Mersey near Wilderspool, the Ribble at or near Walton-le-Dale, and making for Lancaster on the river Lune (Rogers 1996) (Ill III. 3). At the same time troops were probably shipped from the estuary of the Dee at or near Chester to be disembarked in the estuaries of the same rivers, where they would have joined up with their colleagues. The recent excavation of a complex of sites at Kirkham on the north bank of the Ribble estuary (Howard-Davis & Buxton 2000) lends weight to this, especially if access to Cartimandua’s stronghold was gained along the Ribble–Aire corridor.

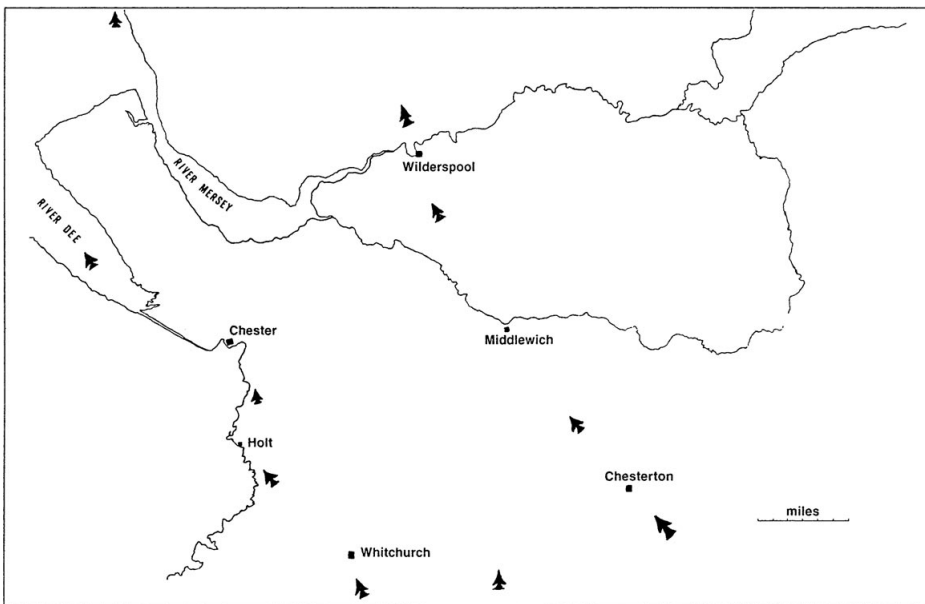
This re-opens the possibility of a ‘pre-fortress’ (and pre-Flavian) establishment at Chester, which has often been canvassed and discussed in the past (eg McPeake 1978); such a site, however, would probably have had a limited role. If the main route of penetration overland was represented by the line of King Street, then Chester lay at a considerable distance from it; further, marshy ground to the west of Chester will have left it as far from ideal for the overland penetration of north Wales. Indeed, it has been shown (Grew ed 1980, 365) that the road from the north-west midlands into north Wales originally crossed the Dee at Farndon/Holt (Jones 1991) and that its extension to Chester was a secondary development. Thus, it is likely that a role for Chester in these early days of conquest would have been tied to the movement of troops by sea along the coasts of north Wales and north-west



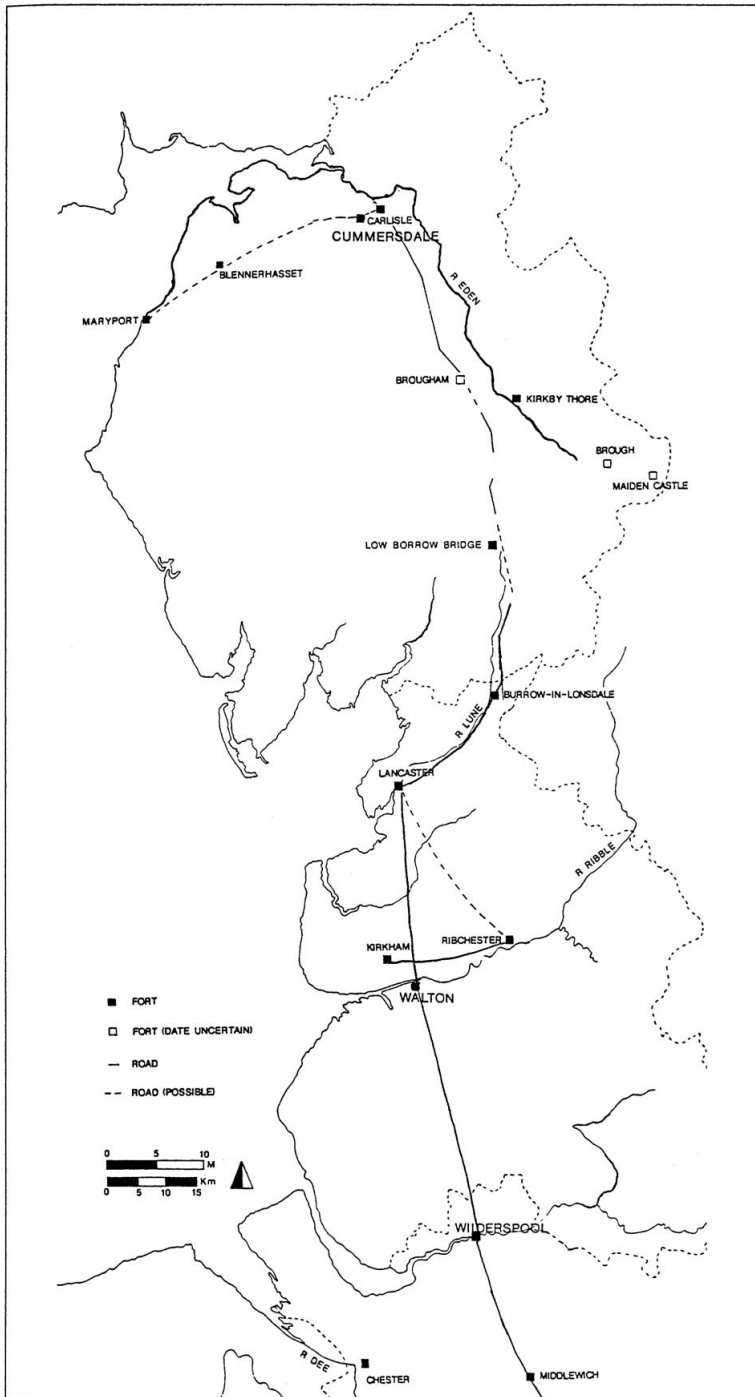
Ill III.2 Copies of *asses* of Claudius: (l) from Walton-le-Dale; (r) from Barrow in Furness.

England, although it should be kept in mind that such a role would have been of crucial importance.

As already indicated, the events of 69 had the effect of turning Brigantian territory into a hostile neighbour of the fledgling province of Britannia; the initial response to this must have been left to the incumbent governor, Marcus Vettius Bolanus, of whom Tacitus (*Agricola* 16,5) is decidedly — but probably unjustifiably — dismissive; references in classical authors, for example, leave open the possibility that Bolanus may have penetrated as far north as Scotland. Bolanus, however, was followed by a high-profile appointment — that of Petillius Cerialis who, according to Tacitus (*Agricola* 17,1), operated amongst the Brigantes, although the historian is decidedly short on detail. Recent examination of the coin evidence strongly suggests that Cerialis penetrated deep into Scotland, besides bringing much of Brigantian territory to heel (Shotter 2000b). Cerialis appears to have brought with him to Britain a new legion — II *Adiutrix* — which was of proven loyalty to the new emperor, Vespasian, to whom its soldiers (whilst still members of the fleet based at Ravenna in Italy) had deserted at a crucial point in the civil war of 69. These troops, therefore, were not only loyal to Vespasian but also were well acquainted with naval warfare. It would thus appear to have been a natural use of their talents if Cerialis had placed at least a detachment (*vexillatio*) of them at Chester to repeat the tactic, previously employed, of penetrating via the major river estuaries, perhaps on this occasion — in view of the now-proven presence of Cerialis at Carlisle — as far north as the Solway. Again, the coin evidence is consistent with the proposition of some activity at Chester in the early 70s. As before, other troops, such those of Legion XX, will have marched north from their bases in the north-west midlands (see Ills III.4, 5).



III III.3 Initial routes of military penetration into north-west England: map



III III.4 Early Flavian sites in north-west England: map



III III.5 Southern gateway of the earliest fort at Carlisle: the well preserved timbers from this site provide a felling date of late in AD 72.

Thus, there would appear to have been a specific role in the early days of conquest for a site at Chester. However, once the conquest of the north was itself completed, the role of Chester changed, and, presumably, under Julius Frontinus (74–7) and Agricola (77–83), Chester received a new legionary fortress as a permanent base for Legion II *Adiutrix* and perhaps — as is suggested elsewhere in this volume — as a showpiece for the new Flavian dynasty. This new site received its own new routes of communication, through Northwich and Manchester to York and northwards to Ribchester and Carlisle (*see* III III.4). Whether a pre-fortress establishment, as is suggested here, lies beneath the known fortress or elsewhere in the area remains unclear, but the case for its existence seems powerful.

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