The Characteristics of Roman Chester

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THE following remarks are intended to explain very roughly the characteristic features of Roman Chester, and to emphasize the points in which its history and monuments are like or unlike those of other important places in the Roman empire. The general conclusion to which I shall come is that Deva was from first to last a fortress, always garrisoned by troops, always devoid of organized civic life and municipal institutions, but differing from some other fortresses by the fact that its garrison consisted of legionary and not of auxiliary troops.

The materials which we possess for reconstructing the tale of Roman Chester are few. Ancient literature contains no mention of the place or its name; there is no single passage in Tacitus or in any other writer, which can with real probability be referred to any incident in its fortunes. Ptolemy and the lists of the Antonine Itinerary have preserved its Roman name; for everything else we are compelled to have recourse to archæological material, and even this material is very limited in extent. In working out the history of many Roman cities or fortresses we are helped by extraneous archæological evidence. We glean, for instance, one or two additional scraps of information about Colchester from the appearance of the name Camulodunum on foreign inscriptions. But the name of Chester occurs only once on a foreign

inscription—at Worms[1]—and that, as it happens, tells us very little. To reconstruct the history of Chester we must turn almost wholly to the monuments found in the city, combining with their evidence what little light we can gather from the general history of Roman Britain.

The facts which we thus acquire are simple and definite. The site was probably occupied as a fortress about the latter part of Claudius' reign, A.D. 50-54, and was no doubt in existence when Suetonius opened his campaign against Anglesea (A.D. 61.) Ten or fifteen years later it was occupied by the *legio ii. adiutrix*, and after that legion left our island, by the *legio xx. valeria victrix*. It is probable, though not certain, that for a while it was occupied by both legions simultaneously. The practice of combining two legions in one permanent fortress was not uncommon under the early Emperors, and was not abolished till some time in the reign of Domitian. After the withdrawal of the *Adiutrix*, the twentieth legion remained alone in garrison, and we can trace its presence into the third century. The evidence of coins suggests that the place was still a Roman site in the fourth century, though neither Deva nor the twentieth legion are mentioned in the *Notitia*, the British part of which was, according to Mommsen, mainly compiled about A.D. 290 or 300. In the sixth century the place lay waste.

In this brief sketch the most noteworthy feature is that the one prominent element is legionary; other things which we might expect are absent. (1.) In the first place, there are no certain traces of auxiliary troops. English antiquaries somewhat obscure the significance of this fact by their habit of alluding to "the Roman legions" as if the legions formed the whole Roman army.

[1] [*In honorem*] *domu*[*s*] *divinae, Marti Loucetio Sacrum, Amandus Velugni f. Devas* (Zangemeister *Westd. Korrespondenzblatt vii.* (1888) 115).

This was very far from being the fact. The army of the early Empire consisted of two great branches of troops. There were first the legions, 4000-6000 strong, consisting almost wholly of infantry, and recruited in the main from Roman citizens. There were, secondly, the *auxilia*, bodies 500-1000 strong, either infantry or cavalry, recruited mainly from provincials who did not possess the Roman franchise. Of these two branches, the legionaries were the better off in point of pay, length of service, retiring bounty, and in other things. The two branches of the army are as distinct as—in different ways—the English troops of the line and the native troops in India are distinct. It is significant that the garrison of Chester included few or no auxiliaries.

(2.) Secondly, it included no civic element. There were, of course, women, children, freedmen, and the like, but no municipal life or municipal magistrates. In general, this was the original arrangement of troops in the Western Empire; the armies of Claudius or Vespasian were stationed in independent fortresses, not as is now usual in large towns. But in most cases the Roman fortress gradually grew into a town. Outside its gates there grew up non-military suburbs (*canabae*), in which dwelt the women-folk, the trades-people, and others, who "followed the camp," and this "bazaar," for which we can find precise parallels outside our cantonments in India, became in time a town, and frequently acquired a municipal constitution, a town council, and the rest, with the title *colonia* or *municipium*. Of this there is no trace at Chester. Suburbs there undoubtedly were; for instance, along the Boughton road outside the Eastgate, but these suburbs never grew into a town.

(3.) Again, some places which did not gain the dignity of a *colonia* or *municipium* had an organized body of

Roman traders (*cives Romani consistentes in*—is a common description), who formed a certain kind of civic element. Of this, too, we have no trace at Chester. We have no trace even of trade. The fortress was doubtless connected with the lead mines in Flintshire, and some of the lead pigs from those mines made their way to Chester. But they may have been intended for military use, and, even if they were private property, there is no trace of an organized trading body.

Chester, then, was a legionary fortress, and nothing more, and to make this fact the clearer, I may compare it with a few other Roman sites. Of the military centres in Roman Britain, the one which resembles it most closely is Isca Silurum, Caerleon-on-Usk, in Monmouthshire, the home of the *Legio ii. Augusta*. Caerleon, so far as we know, had no civic element, and no auxiliaries in garrison. It never grew into a *colonia*, and hence we must be cautious in identifying it with that *colonia* whose bishop came to the Council of Arles with the bishops of York and London, but whose actual name has got corrupted in the manuscript. That *colonia* is more probably Lincoln; Caerleon, at any rate, has not any right to the title. Caerleon, then, resembles Chester; and though York, where the third of the three "British" legions was garrisoned, became a town with municipal constitution, we conclude with the result that two out of the three legionary fortresses in Britain remained military to the last. The fortresses on and near the Wall in the north are somewhat different. They were purely military, but their garrisons were auxiliary troops. If we carry the comparison across the Channel, we shall find very few parallels to Chester. On the continent the legionary fortresses nearly always became *coloniae*: they resemble York, not Chester or Caerleon. And this is

significant of Roman Britain. The province was one which, above all others, was purely a military province: it was in reality a military frontier, with little share in the civil life of the empire. Chester and Caerleon are characteristic features of a distant borderland.

We may now enquire how this conception of Chester is borne out in detail by the actual remains. Of the fortress itself we know next to nothing. The lines of the north and east walls are indeed indicated by existing remains, and we may feel fairly certain that the masonry which we have to-day was built up some time after A.D. 150,[1] perhaps about A.D. 200, in the time of Septimius Severus,[2] whose activity can also be traced in the matter of an aqueduct at Carnarvon.[3] But we do not know where the south or east walls stood: still less can we reconstruct the ground plan of the interior. A big building on the east side of Bridge Street, a few hypocausts and columns, like the one so admirably preserved *in situ* by Mr. Charles Brown, in Watergate Street, are not enough to tell us definite details. On the other hand, we have a great variety of tombstones. The splendid collection of lapidary remains in the Grosvenor Museum contains over 100 inscribed stones, and over 50 carved and sculptured stones, excluding cornices and merely architectural pieces. Of this great number 10 are altars, 7 are centurial stones, 3 refer probably to building, and probably 130 belong to tombstones. And of these tombstones the great characteristic is their size and ambitious nature. The mere inscriptions are cut on slabs as large as an

[1] The tombstone of Ulpius Ianuarius (Athenæum, October 31, 1891) cannot be earlier than about A.D. 150.

[2] None of the stones found in the North Wall give any hint of a later date than some part of the second century. Many are, of course, very much earlier.

[3] C.I.L., vii. 142, now at Carnarvon. I have seen a squeeze of most of the inscription.

ordinary door, in large bold letters. Reliefs are common, and, though the style is rough, there is no stint in size—full-size figures or busts, men on horseback, figures on couches; accessory ornaments are frequent.

Now all this lavishness is not simply due to the fact that the red sandstone of Chester is near the surface, and is easily cut. It also indicates the greater wealth (if the term be allowed) of the legionary soldier. We have only to compare, for number, the somewhat rare tombstones of the auxiliaries stationed near or on the Roman Wall, and, for costliness, the mean burial remains at the Saalburg, on the German *Limes*, and we shall see what the difference in this point is between the legionary and the auxiliary. If, on the other hand, we examine the legionary tombstones in the Museums at Bonn and Maintz, both once the homes of legions guarding the Rhine frontier, we shall find objects closely resembling those in our Chester Museum. The artistic merit of our Chester stones is, indeed, inferior to that shown in many of these Rhenish monuments. We have in Chester nothing to compare with the great cenotaph at Bonn, of the soldier who died with Varus in the great slaughter of the Teutoburg Forest, when Arminius surprised and cut to pieces three Roman legions. But that is what we might expect in faraway Chester; it illustrates clearly enough the purely military character of the Roman occupation of our distant island.

But it is not merely in size that the Chester tombstones mark themselves as characteristic of the place. If we pursue the comparison which I have indicated with the tombstones of Bonn and Mainz, we shall find that the actual kind of sculpture or relief which we have in one case appears also in the other. Two forms of sepulchral relief are specially common at Chester: the

relief of the rider trampling under his horse's feet or piercing a fallen enemy, and the so-called "funeral banquet"—that of a man (or woman) reclining on a couch, with a boy standing by, and a three-legged table in front. Both types are older than anything Roman, but both are common in the graveyards of the Roman legions. Other of the sepulchral pieces at Chester are less distinctive, but all harmonize with the general idea which we have indicated. There are, for instance, in the Museum two small figures with curious caps and crossed legs, which are somewhat like Mithraic figures, and which Mr. Watkin and others have wrongly called Mithraic. They are, in reality, ornaments of tombstones, and at Bonn we have precisely the same figures attached to funeral banquets, and to the tombstones of soldiers. Similarly the curious reliefs of Perseus and Andromeda (or Hercules and Hesione), of Actaeon and the dogs, of a Cupid playing, and so forth, are sepulchral ornaments of monuments which are not indeed specially military, but which are in no way unlike the monuments which occur on military sites where the soldiers were fairly well off.

The other remains in the Museum confirm the story. The few altars found either bear specially military dedications to the *genius* of a century or the like, or are erected to the gods whom every soldier worshipped.[1] The centurial stones tell their own tale: they record the building of the fortress walls by the legionaries. Lastly, the smaller objects bear the same witness. Nothing is more striking in the Roman room of the Grosvenor Museum than the paucity of pottery and other objects of common domestic life, as compared with the abundance found on "civil" sites like Leicester or London or

[1] See Domaszewski, *Die Religion des römischen Heeres.*

Colchester or York. The impression left on the spectator is that in Chester, at any rate, the ordinary comfortable middle-class life was absent. We must indeed recollect that we are dealing with a place in a far-away borderland; the absence of luxury is due in part to geographical reasons. But speaking generally, the characteristics of lesser Roman objects found in Chester and preserved in the Museum, or recorded in Mr. Watkin's book, suit only the idea that Chester was from first to last a fortress.