

XXI.—*Notes on the Disinterment of the Mile Castle immediately West of the Roman Station of Borcovicus.* By JOHN CLAYTON, Esq. 1853.

THE Transactions of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne should properly contain a record of all antiquarian researches in the neighbourhood. On this principle, and not on account of the importance of the operation, or of anything it discloses, a few notes on the disinterment of the remains of the Housesteads Mile Castle are submitted to the Society.

The Rev. John Hodgson, the able historian of Northumberland, thus speaks of this Mile Castle, and the locality in which it is placed :—“ Under the north wall of Borcovicus, the Housesteads Crags begin to rise in rude and pillared majesty, and to the west were crowned with a Castellum, the remains of which, and of the Murus, are still very interesting. At the foot of these crags lie long columns of basalt, which, probably, many centuries since, fell from their sides.”

The writer of the above-quoted passage, an ardent admirer of the beauties of Nature as well as a laborious and accomplished antiquary, proceeds to enlarge upon the natural attractions of the scene. He describes the crags of this district, upon the top of which the Roman Wall runs, as “ bearded with witchwood, rowantree, ferns, bilberry, and heath, and their heads everywhere perfumed with wild thyme, and garlanded with the little sun-flower cistus.”

There are amongst us, those who cherish a pleasing recollection of the amiable author, and who delight to dwell on the memory of his gentle nature, his simple manners, and the enthusiasm of his character, which sometimes inspired the use of language which the cold in blood are disposed to regard as extravagant. Those whose fortune it has been to wan-

der through this solitude, on a calm and bright day of summer, when no sound is heard but the wild note of the curlew wheeling in the air, and the plash of the water-fowl on the lake below, will acknowledge the truth of Mr. Hodgson's description of the scene, which has since been further illustrated by the pen of our learned and esteemed colleague, Dr. Bruce, not less distinguished for the freshness and vigour than for the accuracy of his descriptions.

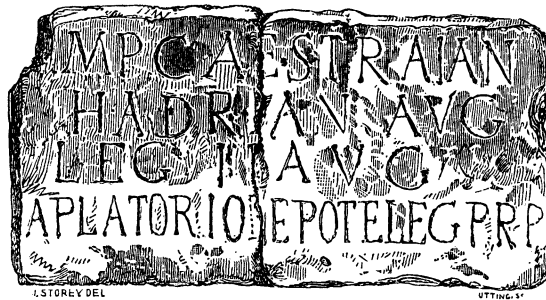
The Castellum to which our attention is directed stands 320 yards west of the western gateway of the station of Borcovicus (measuring along the Military Way); and its distance from the Mile Castle to the east, near the Busy Gap, is somewhat less, and from the Mile Castle to the west in the Milking Gap, somewhat more, than the usual distance of a thousand Roman paces; and in speaking of this Castellum, Dr. Bruce says—"Its ruins are sufficiently conspicuous to invite the use of the pickaxe and spade—an attention which it will probably soon receive."

That attention it has now received, with the following results:—The building is, like the rest of the Mile Castles, a parallelogram, having its southern corners rounded off. It measures inside, from east to west, 58 feet; and, from north to south, 50 feet—dimensions very much the same as those of the Cawfields Mile Castle. In its western wall there are six courses of stones standing; and in the Murus, which is its northern wall, there are no less than thirteen courses. The southern gateway has resembled very closely the southern gateway of the Cawfields Mile Castle, described in Dr. Bruce's *Roman Wall* (p. 218, second edition). The most remarkable feature of the building, however, is its northern gateway, the remains of which are very considerable; it is 10 feet in width, and has been spanned by an arch, the springing stones of which are in their places, whilst the massive *voussoirs* forming the rest of the arch, each of them weighing about half a ton, are lying amongst the *débris* of the Castellum. The pillars of this gateway are standing perfect on each side; they are of a very solid character, measuring 5 feet in breadth, and are carried through the great Wall, which is here 10 feet in thickness. These pillars, as they appear in the inside of the Mile Castle, are represented by the very accurate drawing of Mr. Storey. The gateway opens northward on a part of the crags where there is an opening in the precipice; and here has evidently been a

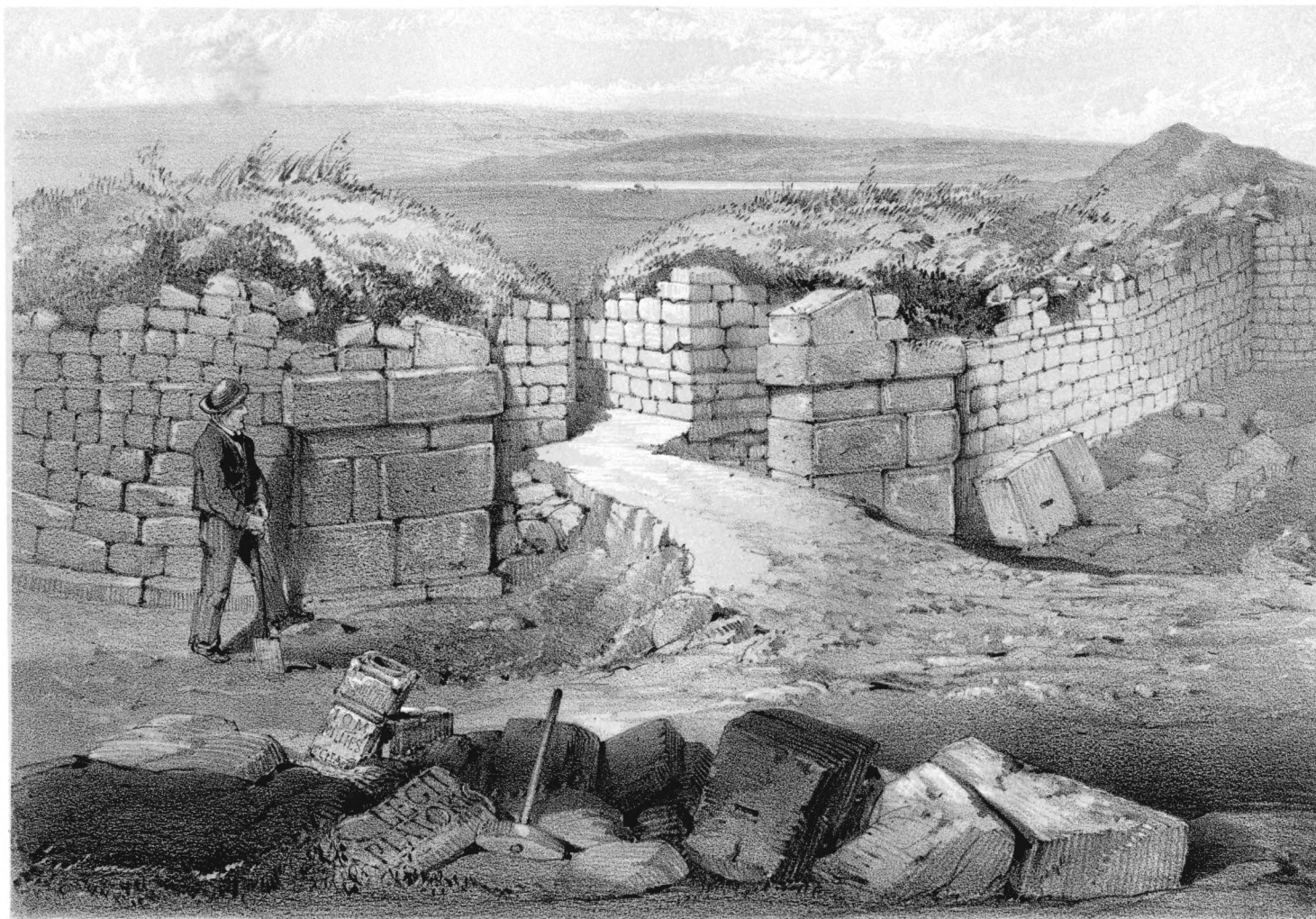
roadway for the march of soldiers down its face. This description applies to the gateway in its original state; during the latter part of the period of the occupation of Britain by the Romans, when their garrisons grew feebler, this northern gateway has been built up wholly to the height of 4 feet from the original threshold, and above that height, its breadth has been reduced from 10 feet to 3 feet 10 inches. The arch has been taken down, and a new and narrowed roadway, with a new threshold of stone, has been formed, thus diminishing the space through which the Roman garrison would be assailable by the enemy approaching from the north. The necessary consequence of this change has been, that inside the Castellum there were two floors—one at the original base, and the other at the higher level adopted for the narrowed gateway. Amongst the stones of this upper floor was found a stone, much worn, on which can be traced the style and title of the Second Legion, and the name of Aulus Platorius Nepos, the Legate of Hadrian, making the fourth stone bearing this inscription which has been found in the Mile Castles of this vicinity. The history of the first in date of discovery of these inscribed stones, bearing the names of Hadrian, and Aulus Platorius Nepos, his legate, is somewhat singular, and may with advantage be adverted to—

In the year 1715, Mr. Warburton, the road surveyor, and herald, (who, more than 30 years afterwards, published an antiquarian book, which he styled *Vallum Romanum*,) according to the statement of his preface, “made a survey and plan of the ancient Roman Wall and Military Way, “in order to shew the Government the necessity there was at that time for “the said Roman road to be repaired and made passable for troops and “military from the east to the west sea, agreeable to its original use and “intention, which he (Warburton) showed to General Carpenter, when at “Newcastle, on his march against the Scotch rebels.” We are indebted to Warburton for the preservation of one of the fragments of the first of these inscribed stones; for it would seem that the surveyor availed himself of the opportunity afforded by this survey to collect objects of antiquity in the neighbourhood of the Roman Wall, some of which were transferred to the library of the Dean and Chapter of Durham, where they were seen by “Sandy Gordon,” who, in the year 1726, describes them in his *Iter Septentrionale* (the text-book of Jonathan Oldbuck). Mr. Gordon thus dis-

misses this fragment:—"The reading is very difficult: I shall therefore leave it to the judgment of antiquaries." Horsley, writing in 1732, observes that Mr. Gordon justly thought the reading of this inscription very difficult, and suggests that the letters APLATORIO may be the name of a place. It was reserved for Mr. Hodgson to read this inscription aright, and to demonstrate its historical importance. It is now matter of history that whilst one half of this stone thus found its way to the library at Durham (where it still remains), the other half was discovered in the year 1831, just 116 years afterwards, built up in the wall of a farm-house at Bradley, the property of Sir Edward Blackett, Bart.; and Dr. Bruce having carefully examined both fragments of the inscription, thus joins them together in his *Roman Wall* (second edition, page 202), that on the left hand being the fragment discovered in 1715, and that on the right the fragment discover-



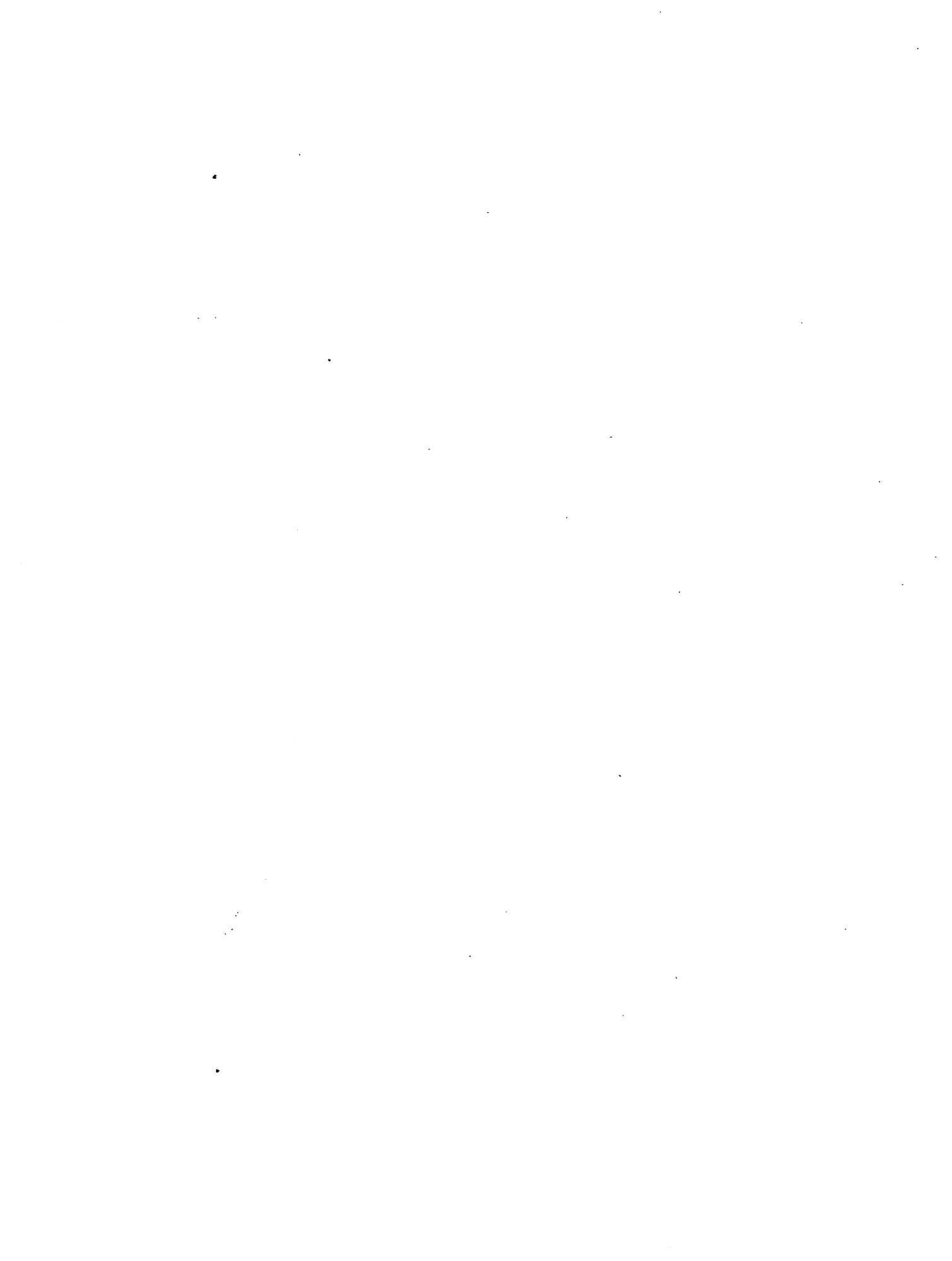
ed in 1831. Warburton in his *Vallum Romanum*, published in 1754, omits to tell us where the fragment of this inscribed stone which he sent to Durham was found, but contents himself with reprinting, as he is wont to do, Horsley's observations upon it. In the year 1751, according to Wallis, (an historian of Northumberland) the Mile Castle in the "Milking Gap" in supplying building stones for a farm-house, belonging to Mr. Lowes, of Ridley Hall, yielded the duplicate of this inscribed stone, now in the collection of this Society. So late as the middle of the last century the lands on the north side of the Roman Wall, in this district, were uninclosed commons, styled the Forest of Lowes. On these wastes there were no habitations of man; but in sheltered spots there were erected sheds called milking houses, in which the herdsman collected the cattle to be milked;



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INTERIOR OF HOUSESTEADS, MILE-CASTLE.
LOOKING NORTH.



the presence of such a milking house on the level ground in front of the Hot-bank farm-house gave it the name of the Milking Gap: in the opening at the head of the Crag Lough, called the Castle Nick, there are also the remains of a milking-house, from which that opening was also sometimes called the Milking Gap. It is probable the inscribed stone partly sent to Durham and partly built up in the Bradley farm-house, was produced by the Mile Castle at the Milking Gap, which stands on the edge of the property of Sir Edward Blackett, the proprietor of the Bradley farm, and that the perfect inscribed stone in our collection was produced by the Mile Castle in the Castle Nick, which was then the property of Mr. Lowes of Ridley Hall. The language of Wallis, on whose authority the statement is made that the perfect stone came from the Milking Gap, is clearly applicable to the Castellum in the Castle Nick, and not to the Castellum in what is now called the Milking Gap; he says "the stone was found in the Castellum "or Millitary Turret in the opening of the precipice by Crag Lake called "Lough End Crag or Milking Gap," If this conjecture be well founded, the important fact is established, that in four of the six Mile Castles between the stations of Borcovicus and Æsica, viz., the Housesteads, the Milking Gap, the Castle Nick, and the Cawfields Mile Castles, have been found these slabs of Hadrian testifying that the Murus was his work.



On the slope of the hill, descending from the Housesteads Mile Castle to the south, was found a fragment of an altar dedicated by the soldiers of the Second Legion to Jupiter—accidentally dropped, no doubt, in its passage, in the character of building materials, to some of the structures in the neighbourhood.

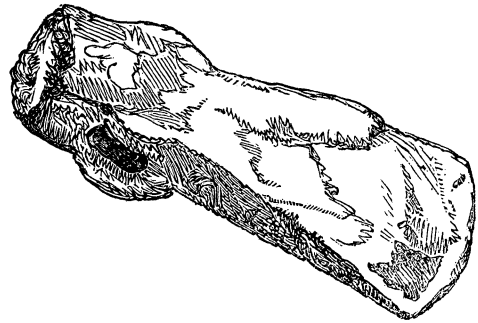
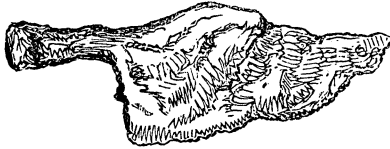
IOVI OPTIMO MAXIMO
MILITES
LEGIONIS SECUNDÆ AUGUSTÆ
ARAM POSUERUNT.

At the foot of the precipice a few yards to the east of this Mile Castle, was found a shattered altar bearing the inscription, DEO COCIDIO VABRIVS V.S.L.M.—An altar dedicated by the Roman soldier Vabrius to the British God of War Cocidius, and forming an addition to the



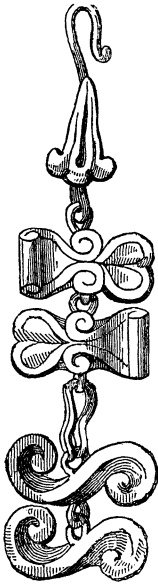
many examples of the practice of the Roman army to adopt the deities of a conquered country. Only one more altar dedicated to Cocidius has been found in Northumberland; it was found at Hardriding, and is preserved by Sir William Clavering, Bart., the proprietor of the Hardriding estate, in the entrance hall of his mansion of Greencroft.

The minor objects of antiquity which have been picked up in the disinterment of this Mile Castle consist of coins of Hadrian and of Antoninus Pius; a mason's chisel, found amongst the stone chippings in the deepest part of the foundations of the northern gateway; a *securis* and *culter* (the

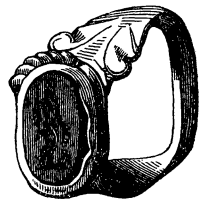


axe and sacrificing knife), resembling those which are carved on the sides of altars; and the usual fragments of Samian ware which mark

the localities of Roman occupation, and amongst them part of a vase on which is scratched the word "DEDICO." The divinity, or other object of dedication selected by the devotion of the proprietor of the vase, does not appear, in consequence of the fracture, the remaining fragments not having been found.



The present seems to be not an unfit occasion to present to the Society drawings of a signet ring and a pendant from the ear both of the purest gold, recently found in the station of Borcovicus, near to the southern gateway, and which are drawn to the full size by Mr. Fairholt.



With them was taken up a large brass coin of the Emperor Commodus, beautifully executed, and apparently fresh from the Mint. The reverse is a figure of Providence, and the legend gives us the precise date of the coin—

PROV. DEOR. TR. P. VI. IMP. IIII. COS. III.

The third consulate of Commodus corresponds with the year of Christ 181. He was a fourth time consul in 183. This beautiful coin, uninjured by circulation, must have reached the bed (in which it has rested nearly 1700 years) between the years 181 and 183. Let us pause, and consider whether these objects of antiquity, found together, do not "tell a tale."

In the admirable summary of the events of the Roman occupation of Britain, with which Dr. Bruce commences his *History of the Roman Wall*, we are told that in the reign of Commodus the Britons "*broke through the Wall which separated them from the Roman province,*" killed the general, ruined the army, and in their ravages carried all before them. In the midst of such a scene of violence, it is not to be wondered at that the ladies who adorned the Roman garrisons of the Barrier should have been doomed to lament the loss of their trinkets as well as of their husbands. The authority for this statement (and Dr. Bruce makes no statement without authority), is that of the historian Dion Cassius, who wrote about the year of Christ 230, within fifty years of the event he was recording. The passage is to be found in that portion of his works which has been preserved by Xiphiline; Dion Cassius, though a senator of Rome, was a native of Bythinia, in Asia Minor, and wrote in Greek; a reference to the precise words in which the historian describes the process of the Britons surmounting the obstacle of the Wall seems not unimportant; they are these—

“*υπερβεβηκοτων τὸ τεῖχος τὸ διοριζον αὐτους τε καὶ τα των Ρωμαιοῶν στρατοπεδα*”

—translated literally into English—“having scaled the wall which separated them from the camps of the Romans.”

The word *τειχος* in Greek answers to *murus* in Latin, which is used for a wall of defence, in contradistinction to *paries*, a wall for purposes of architecture; and the Greek word *στρατοπεδα* answers precisely to the Latin word *castra*. Can any one doubt that the historian, in the passage quoted, refers to the Murus of the Lower Isthmus, and the *Castra per lineam Valli*, which it separated from the Britons? The Vallum, which, according to the theory of those who still adhere to the standard of Severus, would be the only rampart existing in the time of Commodus, lies to the south of these *Castra*, and could not have separated them from the Britons; and

thus we find within the walls of Borcovicus, one of the strongest fortresses on the Wall, and evidently contemporaneous with it, this coin of Commodus, fresh from the Mint, which must have been deposited in the place in which it was found a quarter of a century before the expedition of the Emperor Severus into Britain.

The ground on which we tread in the mural district is pregnant with evidence of the existence of the Murus, and its *castra* or stations, anterior to the reign of Severus; and the time approaches when all will admit the truth of the proposition originated by Mr. Hodgson, and ably and successfully maintained by Dr. Bruce, "that Hadrian built the Wall."