

ON THE PROBABLE SIGNIFICATIONS OF THE NAMES OF  
THE ROMAN STATIONS, "PER LINEAM VALLI," AND  
ON THE PROBABLE POSITIONS OF THOSE HITHERTO  
UNIDENTIFIED.

---

READ FEBRUARY 5TH, 1877, BY THE REV. R. E. HOOPPELL, M.A.,  
LL.D., D.C.L., F.R.A.S.

---

SOME time ago, my mind was forcibly drawn to the investigation of the meanings of the names of the Roman stations in the North of England. No one can read the list of the stations *per lineam valli* without feeling certain that those singularly-sounding appellations conveyed at one time to the minds of numbers the most vivid pictures, that they were expressive of ideas or features, as distinctly marked as their own unmistakeable individuality.

Now, although they have Roman terminations, it is evident that the great majority of them are not Latin. One of course is, Pons Ælii, the name of the famous old station within the borders of which we are now assembled, but I doubt whether any of the others, even Magna, or Æsica, or Petriana; are. Nations in a high state of civilisation seem incapable of originating names. The names given to our children in baptism, the new surnames, which are not new, occasionally assumed, the names of our new streets and new parishes, indicate this truth. English settlers, when they go to distant lands, for a time almost invariably do nothing else than reproduce the names familiar to them in the old country; afterwards, when driven from these, and when better acquainted with the names of the places around them in use among the aborigines they are dispossessing, they adopt the names the natives have given to localities, without, probably, in many cases, knowing or caring for the significations they may bear.

This, I believe, was the process the nomenclature of the localities from the Tyne to the Solway underwent the better part of 2,000 years ago. I believe we must look for the significations of the names of the stations *per lineam valli* in the language of the people who roamed over the hills, or dwelt by the streams and springs, before the southern warriors set foot upon their heights and moorlands.

With this conviction I examined some of the names some time ago, in connection with that language fortunately preserved to us still—and long may it survive in its full life and vigour—which, with very little, if any, difference from what it is at present, was spoken from the centre of Scotland to Kent and Cornwall—the Welsh, and much was I both surprised and gratified at the results obtained. It is these results, with others arrived at more recently, I wish to bring before this learned Society to-day.

At the outset, however, I must disclaim any pretensions to any profound Keltic scholarship. My knowledge of the ancient British language is little more than that which any person of an enquiring turn of mind would acquire by being thrown amongst Welsh people in early life, and by living several years in the midst of a Welsh-speaking community. It is possible I may have fallen into some errors which those of riper Keltic scholarship may be able to point out. I have a strong persuasion, however, that I have also struck upon many truths.

One of the first names which struck me very forcibly was that of the station so admirably preserved in the grounds of our indefatigable, and most valued, and successful colleague, Mr. Clayton, viz., Cilurnum—Kilurnum, as doubtless the Romans called it. Cyl hyrn is the Welsh at this day for “narrow haugh,” the most expressive designation of the site of the station that could be given. “Haugh” is, as all present doubtless are well aware, an early name for a green mead by a river’s side. The same decided feature found expression again when the successors of the Romans and Britons seized the country, and “Humshaugh” and “Houghton Castle” embody to this day the very signification of the word so frequent for centuries on Roman tongues.

Aballaba is another striking instance. I regret to be obliged to acknowledge that I have not visited all the stations, though I have very many. I do not know, therefore, by actual inspection the topographical character of every one, but I shall be surprised if I find at some future

time that the site of Aballaba, or of one of the stations which dispute for the appellation, does not correspond with the name. The signification of the name is obvious, Y bala bach, "the little hill."

Then, again, the origin of Condercum is not very doubtful. Con derch "the elevated peak," or Com derch "the elevated round." If objection be taken to the former, the latter remains, but I may remark that the exploration of the station at the Lawe, South Shields, has shown that the lapse of ages tends to flatten very sensibly hills originally conical or peaked.

Congavata affords another instance of the word Com in composition, as also does Borcovicus. Congavata appears to be evidently Con cafad (or Comp gafad) "hollow round," a description, which (if my conjecture as to its locality be correct, viz., Burgh on the Sands) was probably appropriate in British times. Borcovicus may be translated from the Latin as "Borcom, or Barcom, Town;" Bar com meaning "round top." Bor com "centre of round," either explanation describing accurately, if my memory serves me faithfully, the character of the well-known eminence.

Amboglanna, Latin as the first half of it looks, is yet evidently British; Am bo glannau meaning "enclosing banks," a description, I believe, peculiarly appropriate to the station which is now, without doubt, Birdoswald.

Gabrosentum, wherever it was situated, is, I think, as plain in its derivation. I take it to be "Goat Fell" or "Goat Marsh," which in British is Gafr rhos. The term points to a time when wild goats were common in the locality.

My reading of Procolitia points also to the abundance of another *fera naturæ*—the badger. I have seen somewhere that Procolitia means "the fortress in the wood." I confess I cannot discover how that signification has been derived. To me it appears to be "Badgers' Lure," Brochau Llith. (It must be remembered that p and b are interchangeable letters, as are also v—in British f—and m, t and d, and several others.) The "lure" was the spring, to which our attention has been so forcibly and agreeably drawn so recently, and over which the goddess Coventina appears to have presided. The name of the goddess appears to have been formed from Cof, "memory," or its derivative Cofen, "a memorial," and reminds one of the goddess worshipped by the

Greeks under the name of Mnemosyne, from *μνημη* "memory," or *μνημειον* "a memorial."

It will be observed that in all the instances I have given, the names (if formed in the way I suggest) have been formed from natural features. This adds greatly to the probability that the derivations given are correct. Savages, and uncivilised, or partly civilised, nations, invariably derive the names they confer from the most striking characteristics of the scenery or circumstances of the spots they visit. A study of the meaning of the aboriginal names of places in America, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere, will, I believe, fully confirm this statement. I will not trouble you with the derivations I think may be assigned to the names of the rest of the identified stations *per lineam valli*, lest I make this communication too long, but will proceed now to discuss briefly the probable position of those hitherto unidentified, and the light that the probable signification of their names may throw upon the question of their locality.

And, first, I may say that I can by no means agree with those who think we may look for the stations "*per lineam valli*," *procul a vallo*, "at a distance from the Wall." I think there can be no doubt they must be sought in close proximity to the Wall, either very near, on either side, or else at the eastern extremity, as a chain of fortresses, forming, what mathematicians would call, a discontinuous portion of the great barrier itself.

If the latter be the truth, as I believe it to be, the reason they are placed last may be because, either they were looked upon as somewhat subordinate stations to the great chain from Wallsend to Bowness, or because they were built and garrisoned subsequently to the completion of the continuous line.

I place Gabrosentum at Bowness, and in connection with this, and the signification I believe to be the correct one of the word, it would be interesting to know whether any notice exists in any record of the existence of wild goats in that locality, in ancient or more recent times, or whether any bones of such animals have ever been found imbedded in the soil, or in connection with Roman relics.

The last identified station, travelling westward, is Amboglanna, now Birdoswald. Between Amboglanna and Gabrosentum are four in the *Notitia* list, Petriana, Aballaba, Congavata, Axelodunum. Petriana

I place at Walton House, Aballaba at Stanwix, Congavata at Burgh on the Sands, and Axelodunum at Drumburgh. I am aware that some authorities are of opinion that one more should be reckoned between Birdoswald and Bowness, but although it is very probable that there were even several Roman stations near to the Wall, between those points, there appears certainly to have been no other *on* the Wall, and the fact that one so near as Carlisle was not reckoned *per lineam valli* seems to me absolutely conclusive that no other at Watch Cross, Lanercost, or Old Brampton, would be so reckoned.

There remain, therefore, six to be looked for elsewhere:—Tunnocelum, Glannibanta, Alionis, Bremetenracum, Olenacum, and Virosidum. Of these Tunnocelum must have been on the sea, for it was garrisoned by “the first marine cohort styled the Ælian.” It must, therefore, have been, I think, at the mouth of the Tyne. And to that its name agrees, as also does the name of the next, Glannibanta. We know that Roman stations existed at Tynemouth and at South Shields. The excavations of 1875–6 proved that the latter was one of very great importance, and one possessing extreme interest for antiquarians now. Tunnocelum signifies, according to my reading, “the encircling Tyne,” Tyn o celch. It is a fact that, till comparatively recent centuries, the Lawe was an island surrounded by the Tyne, which found its way by two mouths to the sea.\* Glannibanta signifies “the brink of the height.” The words, as they stand, signify that, “Glan y bant.” What more accurate description of the site of the Tynemouth Castle of to-day could be given? We have already had the word Glan (plural Glannau) in Amboglanna, and Bant or Ban we have in Banna—Bannau “the heights”—where the Roman officers relieved the tedium of the intervals between their more active military duties by following the chase in the highlands near the central districts of the Wall.

Tunnocelum then I locate at the Lawe, South Shields, and Glannibanta at Tynemouth, on the other side of the river. Alionis, the next in order, I place at Jarrow, and Bremetenracum at North Shields. The

\* Another derivation of Tunnocelum, and perhaps the true one, is “Tin uchel,” “lofty tail,” descriptive of the high land stretching out northwards, in which the north-east portion of the county of Durham ends, and reminding one of the heights of Bolt “Head” and Bolt “Tail” on the coast of Devon, and of a famous hill in the Peak of Derbyshire, which bears, however, a less easily quoted name.

former of these, Alionis, is one of the most interesting, I think, as regards derivation.

It seems to me evidently the Latinised form of Y lliion, "the meeting of floods," and to denote admirably the position of the station of Jarrow, which was situated, where the venerable church is now, at the junction of the Tyne and Don. The Don was manifestly, and by testimony of the ancient records which have come down to us, a far larger and more important stream in British times than it is now. The remarkable silting up of the Slake shows what torrents must have poured down it and the Tyne in ancient times, bringing with them the *debris* of the lands and fields drained in their course, and old historians tell us how the Danish ships rode at anchor in the Slake and penetrated into the country by the Don. "The meeting of the floods" was therefore a most expressive name for the point of land where afterwards stood the Roman camp, and it is singular that, after the Romans left, the Britons gave the station *another* British name (just as they did South Shields, which they called Caer Urfa, or "the fortress on the island," and I think also the station of Magna, which they called Carvoran, or "parted ridge,") expressive of the same striking characteristic of the spot. They called it Girwy, which is the name given to Jarrow in (if I remember rightly) Bede's works, and other ancient books, and of which Jarrow itself is undoubtedly only the modern transmutation, if transmutation it can be called, for it is really hardly changed at all. Girwy is Gyru wy, "rushing, racing, water," or it might be Garw wy, "rough water," but the former I prefer. Indeed there is doubtless a close affinity between the two.

Bremetenracum, I have said, I place at North Shields. At all these places it is certain there were Roman fortified stations. Bremetenracum seems to mean "fox hill," bre madryn, or bre madyn.\* It is singular that there are two ways of spelling the word Madyn or Madryn "fox," and two ways of spelling Bremetenracum, the "r" in each case being subject to omission.

There remain Olenacum and Virosidum. The former I place at Wardley, near Pelaw Main, the latter at Gateshead, on the heights overlooking the river. Olenacum appears to signify "the pool of water," or "the place of pools," Y llyn ach, or Y llyniawg, and carries our

\* Or "hill of foxes," bre madrynu, or bre madynau.

minds immediately to White Mare Pool, the very present name of which shows the permanence of its existence in that locality;\* and Virosidum means "Fair fell," or "Fair fells," *Mir ros* or *Mir rosydd*, which, in connection with other words would be pronounced *Vir ros* or *Vir rosydd*, and is a most appropriate designation for the heights whence the lovely views, most of us are familiar with, of the valley of the Tyne, the heights of Elswick and Benwell, and the fields eastward to the ocean, were displayed to the admiring view of the nature-loving, nature-observing, Britons of old."

I now conclude, thanking you for the attention with which you have kindly heard me, and commending the results of my examination of the names of the various stations *per lineam valli*, and of the probable position of those hitherto unidentified, to your friendly criticism.

\* "White Mare Pool" seems to be simply an aggregation of the names given to the collection of water at the spot by the successive inhabitants. "Gwyth" is Keltic for a "drain," being closely connected with "Gwy," "water;" "Mere" is Saxon for a "pool;" while the latter word is the term used at the present time. The three words, consequently, have but one meaning, and that is identical with "Y llyn ach;" and it is remarkable that in none of the four terms is any distinctive feature of the pool expressed, but only its actual existence.

