

XI.—UNDE DERIVATUR CORSTOPITUM ?

BY DENNIS EMBLETON, M.D., F.R.C.P., &c., IN A LETTER TO
THE SECRETARIES.

[Read on the 27th May, 1885.]

GENTLEMEN,—I am no antiquary, but take a good deal of interest in all that can throw light upon the obscurity of the past of this our district. I beg to ask you if the following communication may be of interest to your Society, in elucidation of the above query ?

In reading lately a little book entitled *La Bretagne*, by M. Émile Souvestre (Paris, 1867 ; Collection Lévy)—M. Souvestre is himself a Breton, and an acknowledged authority on the subject of Brittany and the Bretons—I came upon the passage which I here quote :—
“L'époque de sa fondation (de Kemper ou Quimper) est inconnu ; cependant, quelques antiquaires ont cru qu'elle était la continuation de Corisopitum, la capitale des Corisopites, ou les Romains avaient fondé un grand établissement militaire.”

Reading this passage a second time, it struck me forcibly that the name *Corisopitum*, of a place in Armorica, looked and sounded to my Northern eyes and ears wonderfully like *Corstopitum*, the Roman name for the station at Corbridge, in Northumberland, at which place also there existed a large Roman military establishment ; and then, reflecting that the defenders of the Roman Wall were for the most part auxiliaries drawn from Gaul as well as from other regions of Europe, not to mention Asia and Africa, I was prompted to hazard the following conjectures, namely—

1. That among the garrisons *per lineam valli*, and their supports, there might have been a garrison from Armorica.
2. That such garrison might, perhaps, have been mainly composed of a detachment of fighting men drafted from Corisopitum to Britain.
3. That these men might have given the name of their natal place to the station to which they had been transported.
4. That, in the course of time, the name Corisopitum had been roughened into Corstopitum.

I wish now to try and show that these conjectures are not quite devoid of probability.

Not only were there Roman remains in abundance at Corisopitum, for M. Souvestre informs us that "un des faubourgs de Kemper, celui de Locmaria, est encore jonché de débris de briques et de poterie romaine," but Dr. Bruce, at page 339 of his great work *The Roman Wall*, tells us that "the site of this ancient city (Corstopitum) has been long under cultivation, but coins and fragments of pottery (Roman) are still frequently turned up by the plough."

Further, M. Souvestre goes on to say, "tout recemment on a découvert, non loin de là, au château de Poulquinant, des medailles de Marc Aurèle." And Dr. Bruce adds to his previous notice "that a broken slab is built into the front wall of a house at the east end of Corbridge, the inscription on which reads, Imperato[ri] M. Aurelio An[tonino]."

Both Corisopitum and Corstopitum then, were great Roman military towns in the time of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, and his name occurs in or near to the ruins of both.

Before the time of the Romans in Armorica, there was a town on, or close to, the site of Corisopitum, called Kemper. This is an Armorican Celtic word, as M. Souvestre informs us, "compounded of *Kem* = with, and *per* or *ber*, the root of the verb *bera* = to flow, the town being situated at the confluence of the rivers Odet and Stheir." In Welsh, *cen* also means with.

After the Roman yoke was broken from off the neck of Armorica, which was about the date A.D. 375, the Roman name Corisopitum was dropped, and the old Celtic name Kemper resumed, the absurd and misleading modern French name, as M. Souvestre says, being Quimper.

When the Roman military establishment was founded at Kemper, and received the appellation of Corisopitum, there is no clear evidence to show, but it could not have been until long after Caesar's time, nor until the Romans had overrun and subjugated the whole of Armorica.

The date of the founding of Corstopitum is also quite uncertain; it might have been, and almost certainly was, an important road station on Watling Street, before the Wall was thought of, on account of the favourable position of the place. It may have been founded by Agricola,

The names Corisopitum and Corstopitum are evidently variants one of the other, but their meaning has not been explained. That "painful" antiquary, William Burton, Batchelor of Lawes, in his *Commentary on Antoninus His Itinerary, &c.*, clxv., p. 42, says:—"The first syllable of the name may be for *curia*; but what the last syllables signifie I am to learne, and, which is worse, have none to teach me."

Nothing in *The Roman Wall* of Dr. Bruce to indicate the meaning of Corstopitum is to be seen, whilst Horsley, Hodgson, and other antiquaries are equally silent on this head.*

When such authorities fail, how can an inexperienced individual hope to succeed?

Very many ancient place-names, however, as is well known, have meanings, if these can be ferreted out; so, striving to divine and unearth the meaning of Corstopitum, I have come to the conclusion that this is a name compounded of a Celtic and a Latin word. Thus Corisopitum, or Corstopitum, appears, on analysis, to be made up of *corsen* or *korsek* (Armoric), *cors* (Welsh and Cornish)=moor, bog, fen, and *oppidum* or *opitum* (Latin), a town. So Corisopitum is equivalent to *cors-opidum*, but a Roman tongue would call it *Coris-opidum*, and this would easily, to careless ears and mouths, become Corisopitum.

Corstopitum, the British form of the word, preserves the unbroken Celtic *cors*, and has got inserted, for some possibly local northern necessity of speech, the letter *t* between *cors* and *opitum*, making Corstopitum, thus distorting the half Celtic, half Latin word, and obscuring for posterity the etymology of the ancient appellation of our Corbridge.

* In Horsley's *Britannia Romana*, p. 397, is the following note:—"Corstopitum, in the edition of H. Surita (as Camden, p. 1,085 informs us) is Corstopilum."

In Dr. Gale's MSS. it was Corisopito, and Coriosopito in another. The learned doctor supposes the name to be taken from the Corisopitenses in Gaul. For he says, p. 9, *Coriosopitum civitas erat in Gallia Lugdunense tertia, quæ et scribitur Corisopitum*. Camden observes that Corbridge is called *Corobridge* by Hoveden, and *Cure* by Huntingdon, which may seem to favour its being the *κῦρία* or *κορία* mentioned by Ptolemy. But it is very possible that all these names have arisen from the first syllable in the antient one of Corstopitum, or it may be from a supposition that Corstopitum was the same with Ptolemy's *Curia*. Some learned antiquaries derive the name from *Cohortis oppidum*."

I find by this note, which I saw first only on the 6th of May, that Dr. Gale has forestalled me in supposing the name Corstopitum to be taken from the Corisopitenses in *Gallia Lugdunensis tertia*, that is, in *Armorica*, but I nowhere find the derivation of the word. Dr. Gale's MSS. are here inaccessible to me.

It may be observed that even Horsley takes *cor* and not *cors* to be the first syllable of Corstopitum. *Cohortis oppidum* is an unlikely solution of the difficulty.

If this derivation be correct, then both Corisopitum and Corstopitum signify town of the moor, and are equivalent to Morton, or Morwick, or Fenton, or Fenwick, all well known north country names, and the Corisopiti were the people of the town of the moors or fens.

In a poem by M. Brizeux, "Les Bretons," are the following lines which may be quoted from M. Souvestre, in support of the above diagnosis of the condition of these Armorican people:—

"Rejouis-toi, Kemper, dans tes vieilles murailles!
Vois avec quelle ardeur, ô reine de Cornouailles,
Tes fils de tous les points de l'antique évêché,
Pêcheurs et *montagnards*, viennent à ton marché."

That the district around Kemper is hilly, moory, and wild, we may be satisfied by referring to the first page of M. Souvestre's *opuscule* above quoted. He writes:—"It is, as you go southwards from the little town of Châteaulin, disposed in ridges one above another, like the steps of some giant staircase, beyond which are plateaux, covered (in autumn) with buckwheat in flower, adorned with umbrageous eminences and heather-clad heights, from which you look down upon the tall twin spires, ivy-clad ramparts, and grey houses, half hidden among trees, of the ancient and noble capital of Armorican Cornwall—Kemper—the history of which is by turns legend, chronicle, and drama."

The Corisopiti were, doubtless, part of the Celtic tribe or clan of the Veneti, and so named by the Romans, as among them was established the military post or castellum—Corisopitum. They occupied part of the south-western coast of the Armorican promontory—the Breton Cornouaille—in the present department of Finisterre, and are located, in the maps that show the disposition of the Gaulish tribes under the Roman empire, between the Osismi on the west and the Veneti on the east. All these were mountaineers, fishermen, hardy and brave sailors.

The Veneti, so called—perhaps from the Armoric *ménéz*=a mountain, *ménézidi*=mountaineers; *ménéz* being the equivalent of the Cornish *venedh*=a mountain, the *m* and the *v*, initial letters, being mutations, or interchangeable—are celebrated in history as having, in the time of Julius Caesar, and under his very eyes and those of his army, fought and lost a tremendous naval battle in Quiberon

Bay, off St. Gildas, with a Roman fleet under Decimus Brutus. They had 220 strong, oak-built, well-equipped vessels engaged. They were the most powerful and influential people in that part of Gaul, had auxiliaries in the combat from all the maritime tribes from the Loire to the Scheldt, and had sent for help even from Britain, with which island they had for long been in constant commercial relations. The fight occurred in A.U.C 698—B.C. 56.

The Corisopiti are not mentioned by Caesar in his *Commentaria de Bello Gallico*, lib. iii., as one of the confederate tribes on the above occasion, for the good reason that Corisopitum had not up to that time been founded, for though P. Crassus had once before defeated these maritime tribes on land, the province of Armorica had not been completely occupied *more Romano*. But Corisopitum was afterwards founded among the Veneti, to keep them in awe of the Roman power, and then the people around took the name of Corisopiti.*

On the subject of the extracts below I would observe that, if the Veneti of the Adriatic came at that early period from the East, namely, from Asia Minor, and settled on the Euganean Hills, and there is nothing to prove the fallacy of this tradition, and they were, as we are told, a numerous, seafaring, enterprising people, and feared by their neighbours, it would most likely be that the Baltic Venedi, now represented by the Wends or Wanderers, were an offshoot from the Adriatic Veneti, and that the Armoric Veneti were in the same case. Some maintain that the migration has on the contrary been from the north to the west and south.

The Armoric Veneti appear to have sufficiently resembled the

* The following extracts from Hazlitt's *History of the Origin and Rise of the Republic of Venice*, London, 1858, chap. 1, are not devoid of interest in connection with the Armorican Veneti:—"Several centuries before the commencement of the Christian era, the Veneti were dwelling among the Euganean Hills (near Padua). Their dominion comprehended 1,500,000 inhabitants, who were known and feared by the neighbouring peoples as the uncorrupted scions of a hardy race"

"Their intrepidity carried them so far as to encounter, in more than one regular engagement, the victorious arms of Julius Caesar, who experienced at the hands of these bold and adroit mariners, fully as determined a resistance as had been offered by the Aedui and Helveti."

Page 4.—"A few coincidences seem to favour a supposition that the Veneti of the Adriatic and the Venedi of the Baltic were originally, though, as it is admitted, at a very remote period, one and the same people."

Page 5.—"Again, there are some ethnologists who maintain that this people came from Vannes, a town in Armorica Gallica. . . . Most probably the Veneti came from Mysia, now Anatolia."

Pages 1 and 2.—"The produce of the salt pits and fisheries, on which the Veneti mainly subsisted, also formed the germ of an extensive commerce with Britain and the adjacent islands."

Adriatic Veneti in pursuits, in enterprise, in bravery, and in wide spread influence, to convince any one that they were people of the same stock with them. Both were mountaineers, fishers, sailors, and traders; both were hardy, brave, industrious, and lovers of liberty; both had numerous and well-manned stout ships, and traded with distant as well as nearer countries, and doubtless with each other; and, what is curious and interesting is, that they both had commerce with the British islands, and, possibly, had penetrated the Phœnician mystery of the Cassiterides, or Tin Islands. Both had powerful influence over their neighbours; and both had fought bloody battles, by sea and land, with the Roman power under Julius Caesar.

It is presumed that the capital of each was called Venice. Venetia on the Adriatic was founded by the Veneti and their friends, who were fleeing to the sea-side marshes and lagoons from the face of the northern barbarians.

The Armoric capital would surely have been built by the Armoric Veneti, perhaps aided by the mother city. Its name is now Vannes, pronounced in modern French, Vann; but a Celt would make two syllables of it, and call it Vannés. Now, we have only to replace the *a* by an *e*, and we have then Vennés, which, in pronunciation, is virtually the same as Venice. Many an Irish Celt would call Venice Vannis.

Then, again, if the words Veneti, Venedi, and Venice are from *ménéz* or *venedh*, a mountain, in Celtic language—in German Venice is called Venédig—most likely these Veneti were once a nation or powerful tribe of Celtic mountaineers, who had migrated from the East to the head of the Adriatic, and, in the course of time, sent off colonies by sea to Armorica and to the shores of the Baltic; and it ought not to surprise us at hearing of Celts coming from Asia, for they came originally thence, and, moreover, it is known that Galatia was once peopled by western Celts or Gauls, though this is disputed, and Galatia is in the modern Turkish province of Anadoli or Anatolia.

If the Corisopiti ever were deported to Britain, it was at a much later date than that of the famous sea-fight, and probably about the time when Hadrian came to this island, for he had made extensive preparations for his Britannic expedition, and left his rear everywhere in quietude and security.

The 2nd and the 20th Legions were already here, and he brought over with him the *victrix*, the *pia*, the *fidelis*, *legio sexta*. Vexillations,

each 1,000 strong, from each of five other legions were sent over to him from Gaul by his legates there; moreover, of auxiliaries he had six *alae* and twenty-one cohorts.

In the Malpas Diploma mention occurs of the 2nd *Ala* of Gauls, styled *Sebosiana*, or *Ebosiana*, as being in Britain in the time of Trajan; but none of that nation are named in the Sydenham Diploma, which is also of Trajan's time, and none in the Rivingling Diploma in the reign of Hadrian, A.D. 124, that is, about two years after Hadrian's departure from the island. There are, however, it should be remarked, gaps in those lists of names.

On Dr. Bruce's map in his *Lapidarium Septentrionale*, showing the localities whence it is believed that forces were drawn for building and battling in the mural districts of Britain, the following corps are placed in the southern parts of Armorica, namely:—

The 2nd Cohort of Gauls.

The 4th Cohort of Gauls, stationed in Britain at Vindolana, and in Cumberland at Beck and Walton Houses; and the *Ala Sebosiana* placed at Hunnum, about a mile or so above Corstopitum.

Also, the following are located on the northern coast of Armorica, and on a part of that of Normandy:—

The 4th Cohort of Brittoni.

Besides these, it has been ascertained that the 2nd and 4th Cohorts of Gaulish Equites were stationed at Risingham and at Penrith; and the 5th Cohort of Gauls at South Shields and at Cramond in Scotland.

The 2nd and 6th Legions were at Corstopitum, as inscriptions indicate.

We can, therefore, easily believe that the *Corisopiti* were either incorporated with some of the above numerous Cohorts of Gauls, or were sent over as auxiliaries to the legions; and that they must have been a considerable and important body of men, these *Armoric Venetians*, to have imposed an *Armoric* name on a British station under Roman rule.

It is matter for curious reflection that these *Corisopito-Venetians*, the allies of the Britons against the Romans in Caesar's time, should have been transported in Hadrian's time to the banks of the *Tina*, to assist in the defence of the land of their old commercial friends.

Hadrian's Wall was commenced in A.D. 120, or soon after the arrival of that great road, bridge and wall builder in Britain; and the

muris, which he had planned and seen in part erected during his two years' stay, was continued to its completion, for seven or eight years more, by his legate, Aulus Platorius Nepos, an eminent commander, who does not seem to have got as much credit among the moderns as he deserves, for the great work which he accomplished.

The wall would be finished in A.D. 130, or thereabouts.

In the *Itinerary* Corstopitum is named as the first station on the great Roman road leading to the south from Bremenium.

That road existed before the Wall was built, and was perhaps the work of Agricola, in about the year A.D. 80. It would necessarily receive an accession of strength and importance at the time when, and at the part where, it was crossed by the Wall—the station on the road and those on the Wall would mutually aid and support each other.

At this great and doubly protected quadrivium—for there was a road from east to west along the south side of the Wall, as well as one from south to north along Watling Street, or whatever it was called by the Romans—and down the sloping land to the river Tyne, it is easy to imagine that a large and much mixed population would in those days congregate; and here it may have been that the Armoric exiles were located, when they were imported to assist in building and defending the mural barrier, and where they left the name of their Armoric home.

In the *Notitia*, compiled about A.D. 403, the name Corstopitum does not occur, whilst that of Hunnum does, the former being a road station, the latter a Wall station.

The transportation of the Venetian Corisopiti, granting that they were transported, could hardly have been accomplished until Armorica had been entirely subdued by the Romans. Then those conquerors, following their traditional custom, had found it both convenient and politic to transfer a body of warlike, turbulent, liberty-loving seafarers, fishermen and mountaineers, from their homes to a distant part of Britain, where their energies, as friendly auxiliaries, might be made to render signal service to the SPQR in defence of the great Wall, where also their bellicose proclivities might, at the same time, be indulged, instead of their remaining in Armorica a continual source of disaffection and revolt, and a waste of military power.

The Corisopiti, on their arrival on the banks of the Tyne—possibly by water, as Hadrian, as well as Agricola, had a fleet,—would pro-

bably find that they understood, or could easily learn, the form of Celtic language in use here at that time; and this might in some degree help to reconcile them to their new quarters, which would be still less repugnant to their minds when they found them pitched in a broad, pleasant, sheltered valley, bounded on the north by a ridge of moory hills, and on the south by a lively river, with moors beyond, all which might put them in mind of their own moors, or *ménéz*, and their own streams, the Odet and the Stheir.

The name Corstopitum would continue to designate the place, now Corchester and Corbridge, until the coming of the heathen Anglo-Saxons, unless the northern barbarians had previously abolished it. There is nothing to show that the place had ever been called Kemper—a name which, by the Romans, would have been suppressed.

The various modern names of Corstopitum, such as Corcester, Corchester, Corbow, Corbrugh, Corabrigge, Corebriglia, Corobridge, Corbridge, Colchester, Coicester, Colbrigge, Colburgh, Colebruge, &c., have been formed, it would appear, from a misapprehension or ignorance of the etymology of its Latin name, and of the Celtic language, which had long disappeared from the district. Even the little burn on the west of Corstopitum has got more than one wrong name, being called the *Cor* and the *Corve*.

Leland, in his *Itinerary*, Vol. V., 3rd edition, 1769, writing about Corbridge, says:—"Ther be evident tokens yet seene where the olde Bridg was, and therabout cummith downe a praty Broke on the same side that that the Toun is on, and hard by it and goit into Tine.

"I thing verely that this Broke is caulled *Corve*, though the Name be not welle knowen there, and that the Toun berith the Name of it.

"By this Broke, as among the Ruines of the olde Toun, is a place caullid Colecester, wher hath bene a Forteres or Castelle. The peple ther say that ther dwelled yn it one Yotun,* whom they fable to have been a Gygant." †

* Yotun : name of the ancient deities of Scandinavia—the Jotnar, who preceded Odin and his hierarchy, and with their worshippers were expelled by Odin, Thor and Balder, &c., and their devotees, and took refuge in Iotunheim and Utgard, in Finnland, near the White Sea. This name and fable in connection could only have originated during the dominion of the Northmen, and had been traditionally handed down to Leland's time.

† Gygant, from the Latin *gigas*, *gigantis*, Greek *γίγας*, *γίγαντος*, Anglo-Saxon *gigant*—a gigantic person, a giant. In the Newcastle dialect the adjective is formed not from the classical *gigas*, but from the English *giant*, as a "*giantic* chep or fellah."

When the Angles, Saxons and others had penetrated to the line of the Wall, they would find, as in other parts of Britain, many of the Roman place-names strange and ill-suited to their organs of speech and temper, and would, therefore, either supplant them by designations of their own, or compromise the matter by coining a composite name, as the Romans had done before them, at Kemper and elsewhere.

One can imagine a band of these rude warriors inquiring of the occupiers of the place in question its name, and on learning it to be Corstopitum, bursting into a loud hoarse laugh at the absurdity to them of the appellation.

The name was too long, and meant nothing to them; so they contented themselves with what appeared to be the first syllable of the Roman name, leaving out the *s*, which in Celtic formed the last letter of the word *cors*, and suffixed to *cor*, their own word for bridge—the Roman bridge standing there as a most important and useful object; and thus with *bryeg*, *bricg* or *bryc*, and *cor*, they made a new name for Corstopitum—viz., *Corbryc* or *Corbrigg*, a shorter and to them an easier and more intelligible one,* and which is still popular by Tyne-side, notwithstanding that it is pronounced elsewhere, and written, Corbridge.

If the above conjectures which I have hazarded are well founded, and have been sufficiently supported by what has been adduced, so that they may claim at least some degree of probability approaching to truth, they lead to one explanation of the names Corstopitum and Corbridge, which have long been in want of that desideratum.

In conclusion, permit me to say that if the names of all the other stations on the Roman Wall, and the races of their various garrisons and defenders, could be satisfactorily made out, additional interest and charm to those already existing would be conferred on that world-celebrated ruin of Roman greatness.—I am, Gentlemen, your obedient servant,

DENNIS EMBLETON.

4, ELDON SQUARE,

7TH MAY, 1885.

* English people at the present day are much given to shorten words in common use; thus a perambulator is called a pram, a cabriolet a cab, an omnibus a 'bus, a public-house a pub, a platform a plat., *delirium tremens*, *D.T.*, and the Reference department of the Free Library here in Newcastle is called by some the Ref. room! Such is the laziness of the brain and the speech organs.