

XVII.—ON THE NAMES CORSTOPITUM AND
COLECHESTER.

BY RICHARD OLIVER HESLOP.

[Read. on the 25th November, 1885.]

THE recondite paper of Dr. Embleton, "Unde derivatur Corstopitum?" (*Archæologia Æliana*, Vol. XI., N.S., p. 137), reopens a question which has exercised the minds of antiquaries from an early period. In the light of modern philological research, it might be thought that the last word had been said upon the subject; but there are some considerations which suggest reflection as to the etymology of this singular place-name.

John Horsley, in a note (*Britannia Romana*, London, 1732, p. 397, note), refers to Dr. Gale's MSS., and says, "The learned doctor supposes the name to be taken from the CORISOPITENSES, in Gaul. For he says (p. 9), '*Coriosopitum civitas erat in Gallia Lugdunensi tertia, quæ et scribitur Corisopitum.*'"

Dr. Embleton has most ingeniously supported this supposition of Dr. Gale, and holds that the names of Corisopitum, in Armorica, and of Corstopitum on the Tyne, are variants one of the other. The settler in a strange land gives familiar names to the places in which he has settled, and, it is supposed by Dr. Embleton, that auxiliary troops, brought from Corisopitum in Gaul, gave the name of their birthplace to their new home. "In course of time the name of Corisopitum had been roughened into Corstopitum." *Thence* (replies Dr. Embleton to his query) is derived the Corstopitum of the first *Iter*.

But this theory, so ably demonstrated, fixes a date to the naming of the place—"an uncertain date," it is true—but, if the supposition be accepted, it follows that the naming of the place must date from the assumed arrival of Armorican auxiliaries, under Roman leadership, "probably about the time when Hadrian came to this island," says Dr. Embleton. ("Unde derivatur," p. 142). The place itself "may have been founded by Agricola" (p. 138).

The coincidence of a Corisopitum in Gallia, and a Corstopitum on the Tyne is a remarkable one, but synonymous place-names are not singular. Instances of such are sufficiently familiar, and they do not necessarily require us to explain their existence by reference to such an immigration as is now being considered.

There are some points worthy of examination before we admit even the possibility of an Armorican origin of the name as it appears on Tyne-side. We may not limit the history of Corstopitum by the Roman conquest. We may yet further date back its importance as a place; for it had its genesis at an epoch when the Neolithic man possessed the soil, and gave way before his Kymric conqueror, and an earlier than the Roman entered upon the goodly land and possessed it. It was, indeed, a fair inheritance, and one that must, in the earliest periods, have been made the home of man! "The fine amphitheatre," as the Rev. John Hodgson calls it (*Memoir*, by Rev. Jas. Raine, Vol. II. p. 172), in which Corbridge is situated presents advantages of soil and climate which have been recognised equally by the prehistoric as by the later peoples who have dwelt here. In the *levels* or *plains* which form the floor of the amphitheatre, we find rich earth to the depth of twenty feet in places, like the still deposit of an ancient lake bed. Eastwards, the sheltering uplands were at one time covered with the forest; stretching beyond Bywell, which, down to mediæval times, attracted the smiths and ironworkers, just as a coal-field now attracts the modern craftsman. To an early people the forest, as the haunt of wild animals, was at once the source of food, and fire, and clothing, whilst the broad Tyne brought an abundance of salmon to supplement, in its season, the other supplies of food. Let us see, then, in how far these natural resources were the means of attracting population.

If we follow the great Roman road as it goes northward from Ebchester (VINDOMORA), the descent from the ridge, separating the Derwent from the Tyne valley, is a direct course, but as the Watling Street reaches the Tyne valley bottom, it takes a sudden sheer to the west, and so keeps on by the south bank of the river from Riding Mill to the railway station at Corbridge, whence it curves northward to reach the many-piered bridge, which carried it over the river to the Roman city on the north bank of the Tyne. In doing this it passed to the west of the Roman station, and actually doubles upon itself in

its oblique passage of the river. Commenting upon this fact, Mr. Maclauchlan observes—"Had there been no *British* place of defence here," *i.e.*, in Corstopitum, "it does not seem probable that the Watling Street would have come so far to the westward; but having gained the level of the Tyne at Riding Mill, the rise to Farnley would have been avoided, the river would have been crossed near the tunnel, and the height to Stagshaw Bank have been gained diagonally, rather than as in the present manner, and without the nearly right-angle which it makes at Corbridge." (*Memoir written during a survey of the Watling Street in the years 1850 and 1851*, by Henry Maclauchlan.)

But this inference is no mere conjecture. You have here, says Canon Greenwell, a district rich in all the products necessary for life. It was a district likely to be occupied at a very early period, and so we find it to have been. The evidences of its pre-Roman occupation are seen in the very great numbers of stone implements which have been discovered. Besides these, a great number of bronze implements have been found; and there are a considerable number of burial places, whose age is attested by the finding of urns quite of a different character from Roman ones. (Address by Canon Greenwell to the Archæological Society of Durham and Northumberland, at Corbridge, July 23rd, 1884.)

Now, it is evident that a place of such importance, showing a continuity of occupation, not only in the early bronze age, but by the ruder men of Neolithic times, must have had a name before the Roman came. This name must have been so distinctive that it would not be improbable to assume that its root is preserved to us in the Latinized form in which it has come down to us. It is by no means so probable, on the other hand, that an archaic name would be superseded by the imported name of a town in Gaul, brought here by a troop of auxiliaries, or by never so many settlers, subsequent to its re-establishment as a post by the first Roman army of occupation.

Whatever conjecture may be hazarded as to the etymology of the Latinized name, it is well to consider that our single authority for the word Corstopitum is the fact of its insertion, by the way, in the Antonine Itinerary. The road tables are probably the work of compilers at Rome, from notes furnished them; and it is likely that all the copies were made from one original compilation. (Guest, *Origines Celticae*,

Vol. II.—“The four ways.”) If so, the accuracy of the officials in spelling outlandish names may be sometimes questionable, just as in later times our India Office has misspelt important place-names in the great eastern dependency. If then we may assume that the first syllable is rightly given, we may not be equally certain that the latter part of the word is correctly spelt in the *Iter*. Such a clerical error would render the etymology of the latter part of the word obscure, as we now find it.

There is another point to be noticed, and that is the fact of *two* places, each bearing a distinctive place-name. There is the town of Corbridge as it stands, and there is the open field, in which stood the Roman city. The centre of the site, according to Mr. Maclauchlan's measurement, is 665 yards north-west by west of Corbridge Church tower. The two places are quite apart, and their separation is carefully marked in the local nomenclature. The Roman city is invariably known on the spot as COLECHESTER. It is never called *Corchester* by a native. It is to the pages of such as Gordon and Hutchinson that we owe the existence of the corrupt word *Corchester*. It is the more important that we should possess an accurate record of this fact, as we consider the former greatness of this site. It was about three times larger than the quadrangular sites of the *Pretenturæ* on the Wall. Maclauchlan describes it as “an irregular ellipse, with a transverse diameter of about 420 yards, and a conjugate of 280 yards. The area may have been about 22 acres” (Maclauchlan, *Memoir on Survey, supra*). This, then, was no mere temporary camp, but a city which, from the strategic advantage of its site, was from the first occupied in force; which grew in wealth; and which was held to the very eve of the Roman evacuation.

Dr. Bruce realises the bustle and stir of this Roman life, whose very trinkets and trappings have shown some simulacrum of their long dead owners. “The tokens of wealth and luxury round here,” he says, “are unusual in the region of the Wall.” “The station of Corstopitum,” he continues, “is situated on a sunny knoll, in a peculiarly fertile district. It is protected on the north by the Wall, and on the south by the broad expanse of the Tyne. Here, therefore, if anywhere in Northumberland, might those who had leisure and wealth find a secure retreat.” (Rev. J. Collingwood Bruce, LL.D.,

F.S.A., *The Roman Wall*, 3rd edition, 1867, p. 340). Horsley says that Corstopitum "must have been abandoned before the writing of the *Notitia*," because it is nowhere mentioned in it (*Britannia Romana*, pp. 111 and 398). But the discovery of a coin of Theodosius on the spot, by the late Captain Walker (*Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle*, Vol. I., N.S., p. 171), suggests the possibility of its occupation to the end of the Roman dominion in this country. This, then, is the Station known to-day as Colechester, as distinguished from the adjacent town of Corbridge. In this connection it is much to be regretted that the Ordnance Survey perpetuates this altogether conjectural word, Corchester:

It is an easy way to explain the existence of two words, Colechester and Corbridge, by assuming that a simple linguistic change, attributable to the peculiarity of the Northumbrian throat, has degraded "Cor" into "Cole." "The corruption will not surprise those," says Mr. Maclauchlan, "who have observed the peculiar effect produced by the letter 'r' in the delivery of a native Northumbrian" (Maclauchlan, *Memoir*, *supra*). Now, as native Northumbrians, we must protest against misrepresentation. If there is one thing in our vernacular that we consider a strong point, it is this very sound of the "r." The Northumbrian rolls it as a sweet morsel, not under his tongue, but from the great deep of his throat. He is not likely to cease to cherish it; and he is altogether unlikely to euphonize it by trippingly sounding it as a labial. A Corbridge hind, who to-day distinguishes his village as Corbrig from the adjoining Colechester, uses the names by which his forefathers discriminated between the two places. The antiquity of this distinction has been carefully noted by Mr. Longstaffe; and as far back as the twelfth century we have records of both names. (*Archæologia Æliana*, Vol. II., N.S., pp. 33-38.)

Whilst Northumberland was still a franchise of the kingdom of Scotland, there is a grant of Dilston by Henry the Earl, which is indited thus—"Henricus filius regis Scottorum, &c. Salutem. Sciatis me concessisse et reddidisse Willelmo filio Alfrici *de Corbrugia*." This Scottish grant is confirmed by the King of England, who styles Fitz Alfric "*de Colubrugia*"—A.D. 1128-30—(Hodgson's *Northumberland*, Part 2, Vol. III., p. 16). There we have *Cor* and *Col* used apparently as interchangeable names in two contemporaneous documents, one of which is witnessed in Rouen, and the other in Roxburgh.

In the "Placita de quo Warranto" we have both Corbrigg and Colebrigg again so used. (Hodgson's *History of Northumberland*, Part 3, Vol. I., *passim*.) Again, there is a coin of Prince Henry extant, for the notice of which we are indebted to Mr. Longstaffe, and it establishes the fact of a mint having been in existence in Corbridge. The initial syllable of the legend reads "COL" (Longstaffe, *Archæologia Æliana*, Vol. VII., N.S., p. 72). There are evidently two names thus early in use, and they appear to have been indifferently applied to designate the town. How much this indiscriminate use is owing to clerklly inaccuracy we cannot tell; the fact to be noted is, that there were thus early two names in existence.

The present day distinction between Corbridge (the inhabited town) and Colechêster (the suburban field) is specially noted in an early deed—A.D. 1356—(quoted *Archæologia Æliana*, Vol. II., N.S., p. 37), where conveyance is made of "half an acre in the field of Corbrigg, viz., in Colchestr." In quoting this deed, Mr. Longstaffe calls special attention to the spelling of Colechester, and adds significantly, "Here is an early notice of the Roman station. Once for all, I would earnestly beg of our etymologists and Roman antiquaries to study our collections of old charters very carefully."

When, therefore, we have found that the initial sounds of *Cor* and *Cole* have, from remote periods to this day, maintained accurate and distinctive meanings, may we not conclude that this is not one word, passing through a course of linguistic change in transmission, as has been alleged, but that here are *two* root words? "The names of places," says Dr. Isaac Taylor, "are conservative of the more archaic forms of a living language, or they embalm for us the guise and fashion of speech in eras the most remote. These topographic words, which float down upon the parlance of successive generations of men, are subject in their course to less phonetic abrasion than the other elements of a people's speech" (*Words and Places*, p. 2). "This difference in spelling was not lost on our earlier antiquaries," says Mr. Longstaffe, in speaking of Colechester (*Archæologia Æliana*, *supra*). It is most unfortunate that it should have been at any time lost sight of!

Of the various conjectures as to the etymology of the name, that of Camden is that Corstopitum was one of the places noted by

Ptolemy. It will be seen by reference to the map of these islands, in Mercator's copy of Ptolemy (Horsley, *Britannia Romana*, p. 356), that what is now the county of York is laid down with remarkable accuracy. The contour of the coast line is very clear, whilst the relative positions of the towns mentioned in the first *Iter* are here fairly preserved. Eboracum, Isurium, Cataractonium, follow each other in the exact sequence of the *Iter*. The north-eastern corner of this tract is rounded off by a large bay—the wide mouth of the Vedra fluvius [*Ὀυεδρα*], just as it now is by the great Tees bay. If we follow Ptolemy's map beyond Catterick Bridge, along the line of the first *Iter*, which has brought us from York, we should come upon Vinovium, Vindomora, and Corstopitum as next in order. But we find only a Vinnovium (*Ὀϊαννοβιον* of Ptolemy) on the west coast; and in the track of the *Iter* we have the very remarkable names of *Κόρυια*, *Κολανια*, and *Κορια*. If we accept the *Vedra* as the Tees, and the *Alaunus* as the Wear, then the *Boderia Aestuarium* would coincide with the mouth of the Tyne. Assuming this, and following up the course of the river, we have the coincidence of *Κορια* just where we should expect to find Corstopitum. This reasoning evidently led to Camden's suggestion of the possible identity of the places. It is, too, in keeping with Horsley's rule for the interpretation of Ptolemy, in which he suggests that "the promontories and mouths of the rivers are, I think, best known from inspection, and comparing Ptolemy's map of Britain with some modern ones" (*Britannia Romana*, p. 363). But at this point a catastrophe overtook the Alexandrian map maker. The "fault" familiar to a geologist, or the "trouble" of the miner, are small in comparison with "the grand false step," as Horsley calls it, which the geographer has made. The whole of North Britain is bent round, and, "after this grand turn, all is confounded," says Horsley, "and the degrees of latitude turned into longitude" (*Britannia Romana*, p. 361). The western coast is extended in consequence, and the eastern coast is compressed, as we see, so that Horsley, in his endeavours to make the two sides correspond, calls the Vedra the Tyne, puts the Tees down near York (*Dunum Sinus*), and identifies the Boderia with the Frith of Forth. Subjected to this torsion, the northern and southern isthmuses are made to come into their places, and Forth and Clyde and Tyne and Solway duly face each other. With all deference,

to so high an authority as John Horsley, it may not be too great a presumption to doubt this conclusion. It would lead to Colania being far into Scotland, and to Coria being placed yet further north, in the direction of Peebles. If we, on the other hand, simply allow the fact that the map is atwist, and that consequently the Tyne is put opposite to the Clyde, then we may note the coincidence of a Colania and a Coria hereabouts, and compare the fact of the survival, in one place, of the two vocables *Col* and *Cor*.

It has been suggested that *Cor* is a corruption of the British word *Caer*—a camp (Maclauchlan, *Memoir, supra*). Dr. Embleton gives the root as “*Corsen* or *Korsek* (Armoric), *Cors* (Welsh)—moor, bog, fen.” As an imported name this might have denoted the place, but it certainly does not apply as a descriptive title to such a spot.

Mr. Flavell Edmunds (*Traces of History in the Names of Places*, sub. *Cor—Core*) gives the derivation of this British word “*Cor*” as from “*Corwug*—a wicker boat or coracle,” and instances Corbridge as an example. Now, this far-fetched word is worthy of careful examination. It has diffused itself as widely as the Aryan migration. The Greek *κυρῶς* is the Latin *Curvus*—curved, bent. The basket maker’s work was the curving of willows, and his finished ware was *Corbis*—a basket. The very word lives to-day in the modern German *Korb*, and in the familiar pitman’s *corb* or *corve* of our own district. The British *Corwug* is a basket boat, the coracle of the Severn fisherman to this day. The British were famous for their skill in wicker work; and the first discoverer who applied his handicraft to make a coracle must have been a notable inventor; for, consider the laborious work of hollowing out a solid tree trunk, till, by the help of fire and the rudest implements, it was fashioned in the likeness of a cumbersome and most cranky boat, and contrast the art that could “*corve*,” with woven alders, a light, portable, and, when hide-bound, an equally buoyant skiff, and you will see that the invention had revolutionised the rough life by river and mere. The solid tree-hewn boats were navigated on the smooth, still reaches of the Tyne; and their remains, deep buried in the ooze, as we have seen them, testify of the early floods which carried them adrift from the upper river. These would, in their turn, be superseded by the coracle; and at Corbridge, if anywhere, the fisherman would make his home beside its long still reaches of smooth,

navigable water. Down to comparatively late times the importance of the fishermen of Corbridge continued, and their "Fisch-shambles gat" and "Fisher's Market" appear in the Black Book of Hexham, and continue in the "Scamble Gate" of the Award map of 1775, and the "Scramble Gate" of to-day. Whether the coracle men gave the distinctive name or not, the fact is noteworthy that we have so widely known a root word as this archaic and most polyglot Cor, that it might most aptly be applied to denote the place, and that, as it was a common property in the languages of the peoples who formed the western migrations, its accurate transmission would be ensured.



As to the other word *Cole*, "Dr. Todd," says Horsley, "supposes (*Philosophical Transactions*, No. 330) the name Colcester to have been Herculester, i.e., *Castra Herculis*. What led him to this opinion is the altar found here with the Greek inscription on it, by which it appears to have been dedicated to the Tyrian Hercules" (*Britannia Romana*, p. 397). But this explanation does not commend itself.

The more likely interpretation is that, as in the Essex Colchester, and in Lincoln, we have the root word of the Latin *Colonia*, so here, on the Tyne, we may have another *Colonia* preserved in the word that has so persistently been attached to the place. "There is, unluckily," says Mr. H. C. Coote, "no *liber Colonialium* for Britain, and we are left entirely without official details of the successive foundations of those colonial cities which eventually covered our island" (*The Romans of Britain*, p. 123). This supposition would give us Corstopitum *Colonia*, and would explain the survival of the two root words *Cor* and *Cole*.

These two names were transmitted to the first Angle settlers. They set up their stockaded *tun* alongside the Roman ruins—not on the site of the earlier foundation. As the "ruines of the olde town" were strikingly apparent even in Leland's time, much more must they have formed a distinctive mark in the minds of the earliest English. We see this in the superstitious dread which attached itself in their eyes to the place. The powers of evil possessed the old buildings, and a "Jötun" dwelt in them. This dark figure, from the Teutonic demonology, still lives in the legends of the people as "the Giant Cor;" but in Leland's time his very name had survived. "The peple there say that there dwellid yn it one Yoton whom they fable to have been a gy-gant." (*Itinerary*, ed. 1769, Vol. V., p. 112.)

But, to our forefathers, the most marked feature was the great bridge which bestrode the Tyne, and carried the Watling Street, and so the archaic *Cor* and *Col* were compounded with the English word *brig* or bridge; and, as we have already seen, *Corbrig* and *Colebrig* were used indifferently in naming the place. Speaking of the Watling Street and the Foss, Dr. Guest says, "There can be little doubt that in the twelfth century these magnificent works existed in nearly their original state" (*Origines Celticae*, Vol. II., "The four ways," p. 238). Judging by the condition of the piers, as described in modern times even, we may readily surmise that so huge a structure was long after the Roman period in fair condition. From abutment to abutment its length measures 272 feet, and the character of its work may be judged by inspecting some of its finely moulded stones which yet exist.

The early spelling of the place-name points to the fact that *bridge*, and not *burgh*, was the compound of the word. If *burgh* had been

the word, we should not have had it spelled *brige* as early as the 12th century.

It was the 13th century before the inhabitants built another bridge. In 19th Henry III. (*i.e.* 1234), Symon de Diveleston "granted the Burgesses of Corebrig to found the head of the bridge upon his land of Dilston." That bridge, as can be seen, was on the line of the existing bridge, which replaced the mediæval structure in 1674. To the deed of Symon de Diveleston is affixed the common seal (No. 1 of annexed Plate) of the burgesses, on which the spelling is COREBRIGIE. Thus has the continuity of Corbridge been maintained as the name of the town, whilst the adjacent Roman site became distinguished from it by the diminutive of Col—Englished as Colechester—accurately discriminated, as we have seen, in a deed dated 1356; again specified in the Award under the Enclosure Act of 1776, where certain Lammas lands are described as "situate in that part of the West Field called Colchester;" and still so designated in the folk-speech of to-day.

POSTSCRIPT.

Since Mr. Heslop's paper has been in type, the following notes on the subject have been received from Professor Hübner, of Berlin:—

i.—"Dr. Gale took this [CORISOPITUM, see p. 216] from the false reading of bad manuscripts of the *Notitia Galliarum*; the true one is CIVITAS CORIOSOLITUM (for CURIOSOLITUM), which has nothing to do with CORSTOPITUM. See Seeck's edition of the *Notitia Dignitatum* (Berlin, 1876), p. 264."

ii.—"I am not quite sure of the etymology of the Essex Colchester [see p. 225] (CAMALODUNUM = Camalu = Coleceaster?). But if the Northumbrian Colechester has to be derived from *Colonia*, this *Colonia* can by no means have been a Roman colony like Lindum (Lincoln). *Colonia* in later times may signify only a small settlement of Roman *Coloni*.



No. 1.



No. 2.

COMMON SEAL OF THE BURGESSES OF CORBRIDGE.

No. 1. ✚ S[IGILLVM COMMV]NE C[OR]EBRIGIE
(*temp.* 19th Hen. iij.)

No. 2. ✚ SIGILL COMMVNE COREBRIGIE
(*temp.* latter part of reign Hy. iij. or early in Ed. i.)

Device:—A cross slightly *patée* between 4 men's heads
in profile looking at each other.

