

VIII.—COVENTINA'S WELL.

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In the year 1876 there was a notable discovery of early Roman remains on the great Wall of Hadrian which runs from Newcastle to Carlisle. The sixth military station by which the Wall was garrisoned went by the name of Procolitia, after one of the first commanders of the Roman army by which the wall was manned,¹ and if we must find a modern name for the station from the nearest farm-house or hamlet, we may call it Carraw, or Carrawburgh. From a certain point on the Wall a stream, starting from a spring on the hillside, finds its way downwards to the Tyne, sometimes flowing in such abundance as almost to turn its source into a marsh, and sometimes shrinking, especially in dry seasons, until it discloses the stone-work of the well from which it emerges. This well and its immediate surroundings have been the scene of one of the greatest finds in the Archaeology of the Roman occupation of Britain. For the well turns out to be a sacred well dedicated to an unknown goddess, whom for the present we will call Coventina, and it was surrounded by a temple, in which there once stood numerous votive altars in honour of the goddess or nymph. The well was itself packed with ancient relics, as if they had been thrown there *pell mell*, either on the destruction of the Temple by Christian hands, or upon the abandonment of the great fortification by the Romans.

¹ See paper by R. Mowat in *Arch. Ael. N.S.*, 13, p. 371, who traces it to Proculus, the prefect who brought his troop to the place where the Wall and its seventeen military posts were erected by order of Hadrian in the years 120 and 121, according to the account of Spartian, his biographer.

The story of the recovery of the temple and its relics was told by John Clayton, to whom the student of the Roman Wall owes so much, for the zeal and the skill of excavations which he made, and for the scholarly way in which he discoursed on his discoveries. The tale is told in a paper which he read on 2nd Dec., 1876, before the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and which is printed in *Archaeologia Aeliana* N.S. vol. VIII. From this it appears that vast quantities of Roman coins were found in the well, that twenty-four Roman altars were recovered, along with vases, rings, beads, brooches, and other antiques, and in particular, to come to the point that more immediately concerns us, a massive votive tablet, of the time of Antoninus Pius, with a dedication to the goddess, or water-nymph, Coventina, by Titus Domitius Cosconianus, a Roman military prefect, in command of the first cohort of Batavian auxiliaries. The name of the goddess was also found, again and again, on the altars referred to above; who, then, was Coventina? is she a local Deity, Celtic or British; or is she a foreign importation brought by the Roman soldiery from France, or the Netherlands, from Italy or from Pannonia? The prefect who made the dedication referred to above was in charge of one of the Batavian cohorts, whom the Romans had first vanquished and then incorporated. We learn from Tacitus (*Agricola* 36) that three of such Batavian cohorts, along with two Tungrian cohorts were with the army of Julius Agricola, when he fought the battle of the Graupian hills in A.D. 84. The Tungri came from Belgium, and their name can still be seen on the map at Tongres, a few miles to the north west of Liège, and to the west of Aix-la-Chapelle. As for the first cohort of the Batavians they were occupied with Roman warfare continuously in North Britain; they were a part of the army of Aulus Platorius Nepos, the general whom Hadrian employed in building the Wall: (see *Lapidarium Septentrionale*, p. 7), and they were still at Procolitia in A.D. 233 and in A.D. 400, as inscriptions and the *Notitia Imperii* show. The station appears to have been their

regular headquarters up to the close of the Roman occupation; and for the greater part of this time, the regiment and its officers were engaged in the cult of Coventina, in throwing pieces of money into her well, and setting up votive inscriptions in her honour. Who, then, was Coventina, the centre of this persistent worship?

The inscriptions in her honour were deciphered for the most part by Clayton, with the assistance of Bruce and Greenwell, and they were finally edited by Prof. Hübner, who had done the British inscriptions in the Latin corpus. Hübner's account was published in the *Ephemeris Epigraphica* (vol. III, pp. 314 ff.) and in an article in *Hermes* for 1877 (vol. XII, pp. 257 ff.). The inscriptions showed a variety of spellings for the name of the nymph-goddess; such as Coventina, Coventina, Covontinè (dative), Coventine (dative), Coventinae, Covtine (dat.), Conven Covenne (dat.), Covven(tinae). Then there was a further curious feature, that the dedicators of the inscriptions and votive altars describe themselves sometimes as Germans: we have what appears to be a dedication by Ma(nlius) Duhus, a German; another by Aurelius Grotus, a German; and a dedication by the first cohort of the Cuberni, a people of Belgic Gaul, commonly known as Cugerni, and supposed to be a Germanic tribe. The Tungri, also, are a German tribe from the other side of the Rhine, who have worked their way westward; so that there is certainly a German flavour about the cult which we are studying. But now let us turn back and see how the archaeologists of the north went to work on the problem of the identification of the lost-and-found goddess.

It is always interesting to follow in the trail of a hunt that is itself following in the trail of an elusive quarry, and sometimes it is as amusing as it is interesting. In the present instance, there were some rare excursions into unexpected regions of thought, and not a little doubtful philology.

Clayton thought that Coventina must be due to the Roman officers of the first Batavian cohort, and not to the cohort itself,

because the Dutch had too much water at their doors at home to make a divinity of that element.²

Wake Smart thought the name must be Celtic from a root 'gover,' meaning 'a rivulet' or 'the head of a rivulet.'

Hooppell thought it was rather to be taken from a Celtic 'cofen,' which he explained as meaning 'Memorial,' the temple having been reared in memory of some important event, much as if Mistress Memory sat in the Memorial Hall!

Carr-Ellison thought the name 'Coventina' must be Greek.

Roach Smith, arguing from the occurrence of the form 'Conventina' on one of the inscriptions thought the word derived from the 'Convenae,' a people of Aquitania, a country abounding in springs and rivulets, and noted that the first cohort of Aquitanians was a part of the forces employed in building the Wall.

Someone else suggested that 'Coventina' was the idealized form, under which a 'lonely soldier' had divinised his lady-love in Italy, who would not follow him to Britain. Since the whole of the army was involved in building altars to the missing nymph and putting pennies in the collecting plate, we have a striking instance of what I believe has been called 'congregational emotion,' expressed musically in terms of 'the girl I left behind me.'

So far, no suggestion of value had been made, but the next move was, as we suspect, of the first importance, for Clayton reported, and admirably expounded, a suggestion of Greenwell, that there was a striking parallel extant to the Coventina-find, in the discovery in 1836, at one of the sources of the river Seine, of the temple of the nymph-goddess Sequana. This temple, like that of Coventina, was rich in votive offerings and inscriptions; M^{lle.} la Seine had evidently healing qualities, and received many *ex-votos*, her cult having been continued until the Christians burnt down the temple in the fourth century. If this parallel is valid we should expect that Coventina also is

² See his paper, read Aug. 2nd 1877 (*Arch. Ael. N.S.*, VIII, p. 21).

the name of a stream flowing from a sacred spring, and in that case should be either the actual spring at Procolitia, or some other of which it furnished a memory; like Sequana, the nymph Coventina disposed of gifts of healing. We shall return to this suggestion presently.

On 4th Feb., 1878, a paper was read by G. Rome Hall, on 'Ancient Well-worship in North Tynedale,'³ in which it was suggested that the termination of the word 'Coventina' contained the name of the river Tyne, and it was said that Roach Smith had come to the same conclusion. 'I do not think' said the latter antiquary, 'that there can be much doubt as to the reference of the second part of the word, namely, *-tina*, still the very name of both branches of the Tyne, which the votaries of the goddess would daily look down upon from the heights of Carrawburgh.'

Roach Smith went on to suggest that *co* or *con* was the Latin for *with*, and that *-vent* was the probably British name of one branch of the Tyne; (we might compare 'Derwent' and similar forms).

This brought on the scene Longstaffe, who, in a paper packed with learned illusions,⁴ took Coventina to pieces in the form—

CON·WENT·TYNE,

and made three rivers into one, by a kind of triple alliance, much in the same way that philologists further south at one time regarded the Thames (Thamesis), as the marriage of the Thame and the Isis. He quoted the lines of Spenser—

“The noble Thamis, with all his goodly traine,
But him before there went, as him became,
His ancient parents, namely th' auncient Thame,
But much more aged was his wife than hee,
The Ouze, whom men do Isis rightly name.”

Unfortunately the etymology quoted as a parallel, has been

³ *Arch. Ael. N.S.*, 8, pp. 60 ff.

⁴ *Arch. Ael. N.S.*, VIII, p. 88 ff.



abandoned. It does not hold; there is another Thames elsewhere, I believe in Essex; so that the form is not to be dissected in the Spenserian manner.

Longstaffe went on to quote from what Harrison had said in 1577, from Leland, that 'the South Tine joineth with the Went from by east about Lowbiere.' That brought in the Went very prettily as a tributary of the Tyne. One had then only to search for a stream named 'Con.' Moreover he pointed out that in the sculptured forms of the Coventina-find, the goddess has *three* attendant nymphs, each holding up a cup of the sacred water, which suggests that three minor streams have conspired in one united current. He quoted Roach Smith as having been converted to the Tyne, and as having in his *Collectanea Antiqua* (*Arch. Ael.* N.S., vol. VII), abandoned the reference to the Convenae in Aquitania. In fact, we had a triad of investigators, Longstaffe, Clephan and Roach Smith all agreed in barking on the quarry, Longstaffe as Cerberus, with three barks, the others with one loud bark for the Tyne, and some lesser yelping over the rest of the name.

They did not convince Dr. Hübner, who pointed out that the triad of nymphs was conventional; it was found, for example, on votive reliefs discovered at Ischia. Nor did they convince Thomas Hodgkin; I remember once asking him what he thought of the Longstaffe trisection; he shook his head gravely, as one who knew that the triple name was not in the nature of things.

Let us see what Hübner suggests as to the origin of that name, and the character of the goddess: (*Hermes* XII, p. 265). He thinks that the spelling COVNTINA and the related COVVENTINA might belong to a British local goddess COUNTINA, who would easily become a Romanized form by assimilation, as Coventina. And the occurrence of the double V might be an attempt to represent the half vowel. As we shall presently see, there is a strong probability that Hübner was on the right track. He also observes that since we find, in one instance, an associa-

tion of Minerva with Coventina as an object of cult, that the latter, like the former, should be regarded as a goddess of healing. This brings again into view the Clayton-Greenwell parallel with the healing goddess of the Seine. Let us follow this clue a little further.

I do not think that Greenwell pointed out what became of Sequana when her temple was destroyed by the Christians; but the *Acta Sanctorum* will tell us the story of the canonization of the good Abbot Sequanus, who carries on the cult under a slight sexual modification (*plus cela change, plus c'est la même chose*). This at once suggests the enquiry, whether Coventina may not also have undergone a conversion, and be found, she also, among the saints. In that case the masculine counterpart *saute aux yeux*; it is St. QUENTIN. No need to go into Greece or into Italy, or into Aquitania.

Here is the cult still surviving in the Manchester of Northern France, in the town whose ancient name was Augusta Veromandorum, the capital town of the Veromandui, whose name still survives in a village Vermond, close to St. Quentin. As Gregory of Tours says in his *De gloria Martyrum* (c. lxxiii) apud Viromandense vero oppidum Galliarum Quintinus martyr quies—cit.⁵ So we have early evidence for the existence of the St. Quentin cult. We must try to find out whether the martyr shows any trace of having had a water-nymph for his direct ancestor. Between the time of which Gregory of Tours speaks as the resting-time of the saint, and one's own days, there lies a period of not very close delimitation during which the saint, *i.e.*, his bodily representation, was lost. He was temporarily eclipsed for some reason or other, and his very tomb disappeared. This temporary eclipse falls into two periods, punctuated, by two separate discoveries in the miraculous style proper to ecclesiastical history. He was first found in A.D.

⁵ One may consult *Hist. Litt. de la France*, iii, 500; Ceillier, iii, 100; Audoenus, *Vita S. Eligii*, ii, 6 (Pl. 77. 515); Baillet, *Vies des Saints* under date Oct. 31; La Fons, *Hist. de St. Quentin*; and the *Acts of the Martyrdom in Surinus* (Oct. 31).

337 (some say 342, which only makes a difference of five years of miracle, in any case), and the finder was a blind lady named Eusebia. Then he was discovered again in A.D. 641 by St. Eligius, who restored the cult to its former prestige. After that nothing seems to have happened to his remains except a temporary transfer to Laon, when the Northmen were ravaging the country. On his return, the town took its name from him, and retains the glory until the present hour.

We will take first the discovery of the remains by St. Eligius, and so work backwards towards the supposed martyrdom under Diocletian in A.D. 287, and the discovery by Eusebia in A.D. 337.

St. Eligius is said to have lived about A.D. 550, which does not quite agree with the date assigned above for the finding of St. Quentin. He was made a bishop, but his *nolo episcopari* took a peculiar form: he told the Lord that he absolutely refused to take office unless he would help him to find the body of St. Quentin. If Christ couldn't help him, he would go away into the wilderness and perish at the hands (or the fangs) of wild beasts. So there! Naturally after such celestial provocation, the body of the saint was found in a corner of the church; he was really at home all the time. A costly tomb was raised over him and a committee appointed to enlarge the sacred building, for everyone now went to church, being admonished there by the Bishop and his miracles. They had the true formula for Church Extension. First find your martyr: then gild his tomb; then recite his miracles and hand up your *ex votos*; the saint will bring you in much more than you have spent.

This does not tell us much about the meaning of the cult: it is not sensibly different from the legends which are packed into the Church's history. So we will go somewhat further back and try St. Eusebia; (I don't remember exactly if she is canonized; any one who finds a saint should have a participation in the recovered sanctity!). Eusebia was a blind lady of

Rome, to whom there appeared an angel in vision and said to her, 'Go into Gaul and ask for the place called *Augusta Veromanduorum*, which lies on the Somme, where the road from Amiens to Laon crosses the river. There you will find the body of St. Quentin *in the water and in the swamp*.' So she went and prayed on the spot, quoting St. Helena for a precedent, whereupon the earth opened, and the body of the saint floated up, undamaged by its prolonged subaqueous interment: it was without a head, but presently the missing member came floating from another direction, the whole affair being accompanied with such light and ineffable sweetness, that no earthly joy could be compared therewith. To keep up the parallel with St. Helena and the Finding (or, as they say, the Invention) of the Holy Cross, Eusebia extracted from the body certain iron nails (*sudes ferreas*) and took them to Rome.

This story has real historical value, which differentiates it entirely from the story of St. Eligius. It is clear that Quentin was a water-saint; if his sex were changed he would be a water-nymph. It is not, however, clear what river, or fountain claims him; for it does not appear that he is the spirit of the Somme. All we can say is that his watery origin appears from the legends of his recovery.

Quentina, then, or Coventina, is not a Northumbrian product; she has nothing to do with the Tyne, and she must not be trisected. With equal certainty she cannot be treated as a British product; the choice appears to lie between Gallic and German.

Is it possible to get any nearer the solution of the linguistic problem? Suppose that Quentin really belongs to the Vermandois, is that town and district really Celtic? How far does the German migration affect the racial distribution in Belgium and in north-east France? And if we agree that our Roman levies have brought their goddess with them, or found her waiting for them on the line of the Wall, what group of soldiers are the real devotees of the cult? Were they Batavi, or Tungri, or Cugerni or Germans?

The station at Procolitia proper belongs to the Batavian cohort. As Clayton reminds us⁶ 'the first cohort of the Tungri garrisoned the station of Borocovicus (Housesteads) during at least 200 years of the Roman occupation of Britain. The first cohort of the Batavi occupied the adjoining station of Procolitia for about the same period.' If there had been no competition for the honour, and no linguistic perplexity, we should have said that Quentina was a Batavian goddess. But then there are Germans on the votive inscriptions who are evidently proud of their nationality, with a preliminary touch of 'Deutschland über alles.' One of them is Aurelius Grotus; he has a Roman name and a German name; is it not the Dutch Groot? With a Latinized ending? The other is Ma(nlius) Duhus. Hübner was not quite easy about this: he thought it might be read as Maduhus: but the analogy of the former name suggests a combination of a Roman and Teutonic appellation. What can *Duh* stand for in German or in Dutch? That is not an easy question to answer. At all events the Germans are there and are asserting themselves in a non-German environment. They paid the stone-cutter for putting that extra 'Germanus' on the inscriptions. This suggests that Coventina is non-German. It also suggests another possibility, viz., that Quentin or Quentina may have been moved from some more easterly location under German pressure. Thus Tacitus (*Germ.* 2) tells us that those who first crossed the Rhine, and expelled the Galli, are now called Tungri, but were then named Germani.

The Nervii, too, claimed Germanic origin, according to Tacitus (*Germ.* 28) and Strabo (p. 194). They lay a little to the north-east of St. Quentin, and their chief towns were Cambray and Bavay (Bagacum). If the Romans recruited their Batavian cohort from a region as far south as this, we should have exactly the mixture of nationalities that we find on the Wall at Procolitia and Borcovicus. We could then say that St. Quentin was a Celtic fringe on the German immigration. The Teutonic *drang* was at that time westward.

⁶ Dec., 1883, in *Arch. Ael.* N.S., x. pp. 148 ff.

We have succeeded fairly well in finding a Gallic origin for St. Quentin, not so well in our quest for the spring of healing water that he or she personifies. Would it be too venturesome to suggest that Coventina herself has been moved to the southwest under German pressure. We know from Pliny (xxxii, 2) that 'Tungri, a city of Gallia, has a famous fountain, sparkling with many bubbles; it has a smack of iron, which is not perceived till after it is drunk: it purges the body, drives away tertian fevers and disperses calculi.' Upon this Mr. George Long remarked (in Smith's *Dictionary of Classical Geography*) that the *civitas* of which Pliny speaks is the whole area occupied by the Tungri, and that it is generally supposed that the famous fountain, the 'fons Tungrorum,' is the springs of Spa, not far from Liège. Of one thing we may be sure that Spa with its healing waters did not exist without a supervising and indwelling water-spirit. There must have been a cult at Spa, not unlike that of Sequana or Coventina. Our suggestion (made with due trepidation) is that Coventina's original well is the waters of Spa, and that she had two migrations, one into Gallic territory at Augusta Veromanduorum; and the other a military migration into Northumberland.

These are pure speculations thrown out in the hope of a possible epigraphic corroboration from Belgium or the north-east of France. What seems to be secure in the investigation is that Coventina became St. Quentin, and that she is a Gallo-Belgic importation.