

VI.—THE EXCAVATIONS AT AESICA, 1925— INTERIM REPORT

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The following report is mainly a reprint of that given by me in *The Durham University Journal*, Vol. XXIV, No. 7, page 358. Its character remains the same; its purpose is to set before members of the Society the general significance of the discoveries which were made. For, owing to the regrettable illness of Mr. F. G. Simpson, the detailed report, with plan and photographs, has had to be held over for this year; the nature of the discoveries, however, was such that it has not been thought possible to omit all mention of them from this year's volume of *Archæologia Aeliana*.

The work was undertaken by the School of Archæology within the University of Durham, a new organization recently formed, with Mr. F. G. Simpson as Director. Under his supervision the School opened its first season by uncovering the ditches at the north-west angle of the fort at Great Chesters. The object was to gain, if possible, additional evidence to substantiate the theory that the stone forts on the line of Hadrian's Wall were built before that Wall, and only linked up by it at some subsequent date. The site chosen was *Aesica*—Great Chesters, because there, on the west side of the fort, four defensive ditches are clearly visible, and because Mr. Simpson in a small exploration some years ago, considered he had found evidence that the inner of these ditches ran under the Wall of Hadrian, and the appearance of the ground north of Hadrian's Wall suggested that the ditch continued round

the north-west angle of the fort to run along the north side.

The immediate object of the excavation, therefore, was to confirm the previous observations, and to ascertain whether the remaining ditches also continued beneath Hadrian's Wall, with the additional purpose of attempting to find the remains of an earlier tower than the present north-west angle tower, which is in a unique position. It projects through the curved angle of the fort wall and is eccentrically placed. (Fig. 1.)

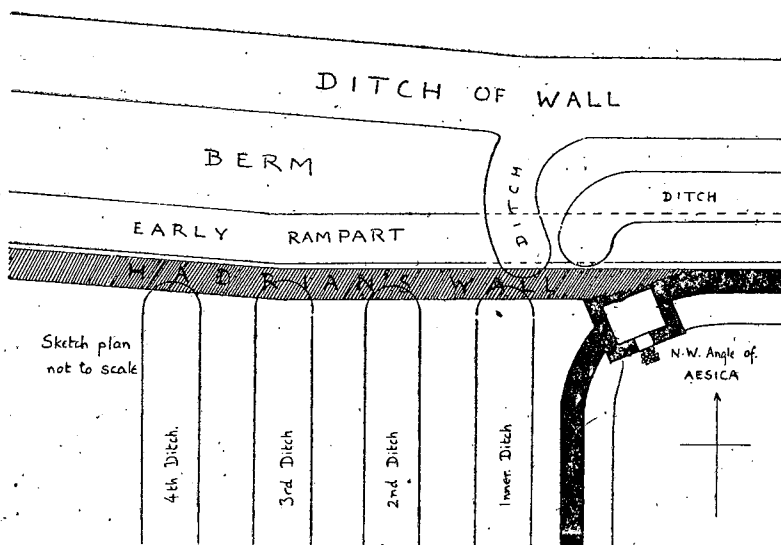


Fig. 1. Sketch Plan of the Excavations at Aesica, 1925.

Despite the most careful and thorough exploration of the angle no trace of an earlier tower correctly placed on the centre of the curve could be discovered. Plainly the present tower is the original one, and was built in conjunction with Hadrian's Wall. A tower in the normal position would have lost at least half of its military utility, owing to the manner in which Hadrian's Wall runs up to the angle. The tower as built, however, is so advanced and displaced to the north of the usual position that it blocks the rampart walk of Hadrian's Wall (which otherwise

would have led directly on to the rampart walk of the fort wall) and also reduces the "dead ground" behind Hadrian's Wall to a minimum.

It is a matter for surmise why the Romans did not join up the west wall of the fort with a right angle in this corner, and in this respect it is significant that in no case where this has been done—as, for instance, Balmuidy and Drumbrugh—is there a tower in the angle. Apparently it was decided that at *Aesica* there must be a tower, and accordingly the angle was rounded in the customary manner. Perhaps we have here another example of "red tape."

In the first few days of the excavations it was conclusively proved that *none* of the four ditches mentioned above ran through beneath Hadrian's Wall. They all run under the south side, but none emerge on the north. In each case where a ditch runs under the masonry of the Wall, the face of the Wall on the south side has slipped, and in the case of the outer two ditches the fall of the Wall has been complete. On the north side, however, the lower course of the Wall remains as firm and straight as on the day it was laid. This is partly visible on Plate XIII.

These ditches obviously antedate Hadrian's Wall. Where, then, did they cease? The Turf Wall at once came to mind, and it was then observed that in this section the berm is abnormally wide, exceeding the normal 18 or 20 feet by 12 feet or more. This would provide room for the existence in front of Hadrian's Wall of an earlier rampart of the nature of the Turf Wall. As a matter of fact, in clearing the north face of the Wall, the workmen came almost immediately upon a heavy stone kerbing on the berm running parallel to the north face of the Wall and almost touching it. It speedily became evident that the extra width of the berm was in fact due to the presence of the earlier rampart upon it. No evident remains, however, had been expected, for the Turf Wall, where it remains at Birdoswald, has no stone foundation at all. Whatever the reason for the variation may be, at *Aesica* the earlier rampart foundation has survived as a bedding of whin boulders,

with a kerbing of whin and freestone on each side. The average width of the whole is 11 feet.

The most careful observation of the earth above this foundation has failed to give any clue to the nature of the superstructure. There is not a trace of mortar, and the bedding itself is too rough for a good masonry superstructure. Dr. G. Macdonald, who viewed it, declared it to be very similar to that of the Antonine turf rampart. But the narrow dimensions create a difficulty. The usual width for a turf rampart, even with a stone bedding, is about 15 feet at least, that is in this country. The ramparts of the Augustan legionary forts at Haltern, Xantern, Vindonissa, Mainz, and of the forts at Urspring, Saalburg, Kneblinghausen, Munningen, and the station of the Rhine fleet at Köln were all of earth, revetted with wood; the thickness being in most cases three metres, that is, ten Roman feet. But we have no post-holes at *Aesica*, so that whatever the structure was, it was not revetted in that way.

The foundations of the early rampart were next sought about 100 yards farther west. The inner (south) kerb was found, but not the outer. Farther afield it was observed that the berm in Cockmount Hill Wood was still 30 feet wide. The outer kerbing here was actually visible, projecting through the carpet of pine needles. An excellent length was uncovered and showed the same dimensions as before (Plate XIV), but with a larger proportion of freestone in the kerbing, and better masonry. By the kind permission of Colonel Edward Joicey, of Blenkinsopp Hall, this piece is to be left uncovered.

A trench cut west of the wood, where the berm seemed to be assuming more normal proportions, found the north kerb of the foundation now only 9 feet 6 inches from the face of Hadrian's Wall. It is therefore to be presumed that the south kerb at this point has already run some 18 inches under the latter. From here to *Aesica*, a distance of nearly a mile, the earlier rampart is followed closely by Hadrian's Wall, the footing courses nearly touching. Between the second and third ditches (that is, a little farther east than it is shown on the sketch plan,

Fig. 1) the earlier rampart changes direction (clearly visible in Plate XIII). In this it is again closely followed by Hadrian's Wall with just a few inches divergence in order to join flush with the north face of the fort.

There is no attempt to join up the earlier rampart to the corner of the fort. On the contrary, its foundations have been traced continuing on in the same direction for at least 15 feet across the north face of the fort. Further exploration in this direction is most urgently required, for it is still diverging from the fort wall, and must shortly approach too closely to the great ditch of Hadrian's Wall (which must originally have been that of the earlier rampart). Clearly something must happen in the next few yards, most probably another change in direction, and two such changes on such easy ground would suggest the existence of an earth fort.

One is naturally attracted by the theory that on this exposed stretch across the Cawfields gap it was necessary to build the new stone rampart before pulling down the old rampart owing to the possibility of an attack in force by the natives. This would perhaps explain the extraordinary fact that the new stone Wall of Hadrian was built over the ends of four ditches, when firm ground was available immediately in front.

At some time after the building of Hadrian's Wall the weakness of the north-west angle led the Roman engineers to cut two ditches through the berm and the earlier rampart foundation, just at the point where Hadrian's Wall provides cover from the angle tower for the attacking forces. One of these ditches was quite short and ran in a remarkable curve into the great ditch. The other may owe its existence to the unusual width of the berm, for it turns immediately and runs, apparently, along the whole of the north face of the fort. Both contained second and third century pottery, but only one very small fragment of the fourth century "vesicular" ware turned up. The eastern ditch was full of fallen masonry, including the fragments of two door or window heads, presumably from the angle tower (seen lying on the top of

Hadrian's Wall in the centre of Plate XIII, where the breaks caused by the ditches in the earlier rampart foundation are also visible).

The results of this excavation are of far-reaching importance. The turf wall, which Professor Haverfield believed to extend over the whole length of the system, must again be sought for everywhere. The evidence obtained at the west gate at Chesters must be reconsidered, for, although different interpretations were placed upon it at the time, it is now evident that what was found there was remarkably similar to what was uncovered at *Aesica*. Moreover, the theory that the stone forts first stood alone has received a serious blow. In short, a new and extensive field for research has been opened.

It is to be hoped that Mr. Simpson will be able to produce his full report in time for the next volume. Many interesting points and all difficult discussion has been left over from this report for his fuller exposition. His active co-operation on the Wall this season will be greatly missed, particularly by the Durham School of Archæology, which may not be able to resume its work at *Aesica* for the present.



FIG. 2.—VIEW OF THE EXCAVATIONS LOOKING WEST.
(1) North Wall of Fort, (2) and (4) Early Rampart Foundation, (3) the Lineal Wall, (5) the Berm,
(6) Ditch, (7) West Wall of Fort, (8) Four Ditches.



FIG. 3.—VIEW OF THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE EARLY RAMPART IN
COCKMOUNT HILL WOOD, LOOKING EAST.

