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CARAUSIAN AND ALLECTAN COIN EVIDENCE FROM THE NORTHERN FRONTIER

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THERE ARE NO Carausian or Allectan hoards at all from the Northern Frontier.¹ The entire area to the north of Hadrian's Wall has only produced five coins of Carausius and one of Allectus.² This must reflect upon the condition of the frontier zone and beyond and has been used to support two basic theories about this condition. The rigidly applied system of wall periods imposed on the history of that frontier as a whole, although primarily suggested by the evidence from one site, has caused many dogmatic assumptions to be made for which there is often limited evidence. Dr. Kent deals with one axiomatic date in his paper on the evacuation of Hadrian's Wall.³ For many scholars 297 is another such date; a neat century after the Severan problems. This may be seen from Richmond's description of the events of that time, "The defeat of Allectus and his army ... gave the same opportunity to the northern tribes as they had had a century earlier and they swept over the denuded frontier land." This is followed by an exaggerated statement of the evidence, "Excavated sites from the wall to York exhibit a second complete devastation in which Habitancum and Bremenium were included." The virtual absence of the coins of Carausius and Allectus would thus be explained in terms of an absence of troops from the frontier area, because they had been withdrawn for duty in the south. The few coins from beyond the frontier make no impression on this theory because of their very paucity. Those from Traprain Law may have been part of a small haul of booty or the result of some small time trading.

Great lengths have been gone to by those who subscribe to this view in order that events might square with the axiomatic destruction date. Grace Simpson discusses the coins from the sacellum at Bewcastle which close with eleven of the Tetrici, "although the strong room was not looted and destroyed until A.D. 296".⁴ That such looting and destruction took place is not brought into question even though two silver plaques were discovered there; testimony, no doubt, to the carelessness of the looters. These coins are discussed by Sutherland⁵ who calls them, "a pattern of the small

* Carausius was in Britain 287-293, and Allectus 293-296.

¹ This assumes that the coins from the bed of the Tees (cf. Longstaffe, *History of Darlington*. 1854 p. 187) are an accumulation rather than a hoard.

² cf. *P.S.A.S.* vol. 103 pp. 113 ff for a summary of the Roman coin finds from Scotland.

³ J. P. C. Kent "Coin Evidence and the Evacuation of Hadrian's Wall", *CW* n.s. L 1 pp. 4-15.

⁴ G. Simpson *Britons and the Roman Army* p. 170.

⁵ *CW* n.s. XXXVIII pp. 232-234.

change officially in use at that time.... There are as many imitations as there are orthodox coins ... These coins, therefore, suggest a progressive decline in the currency at Bewcastle ... coins of poor style, and of module fluctuating between the orthodox and the true minim are money of necessity in the fullest sense. That this is the explanation of the present coins is also suggested by the fact that not a single piece of Carausius and Allectus is included". This progressive decline is suggestive; but not, surely, that this represents a typical cross-section of the coinage of 296 as Simpson tries to argue. She mentions the Tetrican Amlwch hoard⁶ as evidence for the prolonged circulation of Tetrician coins and suggests that, "this would surely explain any gaps of Carausius and Allectus in Northern Britain? There is the strongroom in Bewcastle Fort looted in 296 which had none but was nevertheless occupied up to 296 by troops...."

That destruction or devastation took place on a large scale is far from clear, but there was a considerable rebuilding⁷ programme, often to new specifications, set under way sometime shortly after Constantius had recovered the island. This again seems reminiscent of events a century earlier and coupled with the known fact that Constantius came over to campaign in Scotland,⁸ the case for the traditional view seems strong after all. Allectus drained the frontier of its troops as Albinus had done, with the result that it was again overrun so that Constantius felt it necessary to intervene in person, mount an expedition into Scotland to punish the invaders and inaugurate a full-scale rebuilding programme. After this, the same garrisons went into the new forts as had been in the old, hence the listing in the Notitia. This is broadly the view taken by Frere⁹ who does, however, summarise the alternative in a lengthy footnote.¹⁰

Had Carausius felt his northern frontier to be under pressure then, surely, he would have done something about it. His main problems were in the south and east and he seems to have left the northern frontier alone, presumably because he felt it was comparatively secure. This is not to say that the area was not in his control. As Birley¹¹ says, "from the milestone of Carausius found a little south of Carlisle we have ample evidence for continued control of the wall area". He goes on to suggest that the lack of hoards of this period is because, "the military zone was the safest place to be living in". The implication here is that it was safest because of a strong military presence, but it seems more likely that it was felt to be so safe, by this time, that there was no need for a strong military presence at all. Dr. Kent¹² draws a fourth-century parallel between the lower Danube frontier, as described by Themistius,¹³ and the frontier in northern Britain. This state of affairs may well apply in the third century during which the empire faced major crises on several fronts. In such circumstances, the idea of withdrawing more and more troops from

⁶ in lit. citing B.C.S. IX 1938 pp. 168-183.

⁷ e.g. Housesteads *A.A.*⁴ XIV, p. 177; Corbridge *A.A.*⁴ XV, p. 264, XVI p. 101, XXI p. 148; Birdoswald *R.I.B.* 1912; High Rochester *A.A.*⁴ XIII p. 181; Chesterholm *A.A.*⁴ VIII, p. 210; Halton *A.A.*⁴ XIV, pp. 152-3; cf. also S. S. Frere *Britannia* p. 341 n.

⁸ Pan. Lat. VI (VII) 7.2.

⁹ *Britannia* pp. 341 ff.

¹⁰ For an even more garbled version of events, based on the finds at Bewcastle cf. *CW* n.s. XXII, pp. 220-221.

¹¹ E. B. Birley in lit.

¹² *CW* n.s. vol. LI, pp. 14-15.

¹³ Them. *Or.* 10 p. 136a.

a comparatively safe British frontier must have seemed increasingly attractive. This would have left a run down frontier area which fits with the evidence of the Carausian and Allectan coinage. Their distribution suggests a peace-time situation. Corbridge and South Shields produce the overwhelming majority of these coins, and both these places are centres of commercial activity, trade and traffic. The more strictly military sites produce very few such coins. This would be remarkable if they were garrisoned in any strength but not if they were in the keeping of small caretaker garrisons at most. This would also explain the general physical deterioration of the structures. The Birdoswald inscription¹⁴ records the restoration of the, "praetorium quod erat humo copertum et in labem conlapsum et principia et balneum. . . ." This squares perfectly well with a lengthy period of increasing neglect in the latter half of the third century and the same can be said about the whole of the rebuilding programme which Constantius found it necessary to undertake.

The milestone provides a tangible complement to the numismatic evidence of Carausius' authority over the frontier area. There is nothing of this sort for Allectus. His reign was shorter and he was under more immediate pressure from the south than his predecessor had been. His coins generally do not seem to have been dispersed on a comparable scale to those of Carausius even allowing for the discrepancy in the lengths of their reigns. This is reflected by finds from the northern frontier area. Allectus could not withdraw all the troops from the north; there were in fact no troops there to call on. The area was left even more to its own devices as it had been increasingly so for several decades. If there was no sudden massive withdrawal to tempt the northern tribes to cross the frontier then what did so tempt them if indeed they were tempted at all? Constantius campaigned in Scotland and revitalised the northern frontier. There must have been a reason for this. The very run down condition of the frontier installations may have provided sufficient reason to restore them. This would provide useful employment for the redistributed troops in the newly recovered island and would combine the improvement of their new living quarters with a general tightening up of military discipline, the greatest enemy of which was lack of work for the troops. The expedition into Scotland may also be explained without recourse to the assumption that it was the aftermath of some great invasion. The nature of the historical evidence is untrustworthy,¹⁵ as some distortion in favour of Constantius is inevitable. This campaign was the last of Constantius' life and may well have been used by him as a means of providing a pretext to get his son by his side and introduce him to a body of loyal troops before it was too late. The Carausian coins from Traprain Law suggest trade rather than trouble. There the coin series, "continues with numbers of coins of the British and Gallic usurpers, seeming to show that by fairly constant trade with the area to the south, it was sharing its vicissitudes of coinage directly".¹⁶ It is certainly possible to imagine a show of force by Constantius, after his plans for renovating the frontier had been completed,

¹⁴ *R.I.B.* 1912. My conclusions here are independent of and preceded the publication of those of Mr. J. P. Gillam (*A.A.*⁵, II, 13). It is gratifying that he should have reached the same conclusions from a different approach.

¹⁵ Pan. Lat. VI (VII) 7.

¹⁶ J. Ingram *Roman Coin Finds From Scotland*, B.A. Diss. Durham 1963 p. 23.

which the panegyric naturally exaggerated but which need not have been directly punitive.

FINDS OF CARAUSIUS AND ALLECTUS IN THE NORTHERN FRONTIER AREA

TRAPRAIN LAW—3 × C: 1 × A

NEWSTEAD—1 × C

HIGH ROCHESTER—1 × C

SOUTH SHIELDS—21 × C: 8 × A

CORBRIDGE¹⁷—156 × C: 18 × A

CHESTERS—1 × C

CONVENTINAS' WELL¹⁸—25 × C: 16 × A

HOUSESTEADS—2 × C¹⁹: 1 × A

CHESTERHOLM—3 × C: 1 × A

WINSHIELDS—1 × C

CASTLESTEADS—2 × C

BECKFOOT—1 × C (doubtful)

MARYPORT—1 × C

EBCHESTER—1 × C

CHESTER-LE-STREET—4 × C: 1 × A

SEATON CAREW—1 × C

Nr DARLINGTON—"some" C

PIERCEBRIDGE—4 × C: 1 × A

References

P.S.A.S. LIV p. 86; LVI p. 236, p. 258; LXXXV pp. 137–169; LXXXIX pp. 120 ff; XCIV p. 137; CIII pp. 113–168; Ingram J. *Roman Coin Finds From Scotland* B.A. Diss. Durham 1963, p. 23. P.S.A.S. I p. 36; LII p. 272; CIII pp. 113–168; Ingram *op. cit.* p. 24. A.A.³ I p. 183; XXI p. 187. A.A.² X pp. 299 ff, AA⁵ III pp. 221–2.

Excav. Reports 1908–12.

A.A.¹ III p. 146.

Roach Smith. Coll. Ant. vol. 4, p. 131.

A.A.² XXV p. 299.

C.W. ns XI p. 437.

C.W. ns XXII pp. 222 ff.

C.W. ns XXXVI p. 82.

C.W. ns XV p. 171.

Longstaffe. *History of Darlington* 1854 p. 187; AA⁴ I p. 32.

Trans. North. + Durham A & A Soc. n.s. I p. 39.

¹⁷ The coins from Corbridge present particular problems as they have become widely distributed. The figures given here are based on the efforts of P. J. Casey to compile a definitive catalogue for the site. I myself have examined 146 coins of Carausius and 15 of Allectus.

¹⁸ These coins have, like those from Corbridge, been inadequately cared for. I have examined 20 of Carausius and 5 of Allectus.

¹⁹ Also one "probably Carausius" found in 1932. W. Percy Hedley.

Analysis of Sequence Marks on Corbridge Coins together with other sites for comparison: (based only on legible coins)

CARAVSIVS	CORBRIDGE	:	RICHBOROUGH	:	WROXETER	:	ST ALBANS
$\frac{1}{\text{ML}}$	5	.	51	.	6	.	13
$\frac{\text{L/}}{\text{ML}}$	4	.	8	.	1	.	2
$\frac{\text{F/O}}{\text{ML}}$	12	.	47	.	2	.	16
$\frac{\text{B/E}}{\text{MLXXI}}$	13	.	38	.	1	.	10
$\frac{\text{S/P}}{\text{MLXXI}}$	8	.	33	.	1	.	11
$\frac{\text{S/P}}{\text{ML}}$	6	.	13	.	0	.	2
$\frac{1}{\text{C}}$	8	.	16	.	2	.	9
$\frac{1}{\text{MC}}$	0	.	3	.	0	.	1
$\frac{\text{S/P}}{\text{C}}$	4	.	14	.	0	.	3
$\frac{\text{S/C}}{\text{C}}$	2	.	2	.	1	.	1
$\frac{\text{S/C}}{\text{C}}$	2	.	9	.	2	.	8
$\frac{\text{S/P}}{\text{C}}$	9	.	32	.	2	.	2
RSR	0	.	1	.	0	.	2
BRI	1	.	2	.	1	.	0
"ROUEN"	0	.	4	.	1	.	0
$\frac{1}{\text{C}}$	28	.	408	.	14	.	105

ALLECTVS

$\frac{\text{S/P}}{\text{ML}}$	4	.	19	.	2	.	5
$\frac{\text{S/A}}{\text{ML}}$	2	.	(9 × S/A) 32 MSL)	.	2	.	8
$\frac{\text{S/P}}{\text{C}}$	6	.	25	.	3	.	5
$\frac{1}{\text{QL}}$	2	.	40	.	1	.	14
$\frac{1}{\text{QC}}$	2	.	43	.	3	.	18

