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The date of the Stanegate, and a hypothesis about the manner and timing of the construction of Roman roads in Britain

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THE Stanegate is the name given to the Roman road between Carlisle and Corbridge. It has been generally accepted that this road was constructed during the governorship of Agricola (78 to 84 A.D.), and that its purpose was to provide a link between the two main western and eastern routes northwards to his campaigns in Scotland. Yet a study of the evidence suggests that the recorded line of the Stanegate is more likely to have been established later, probably under the reign of the Emperor Trajan (98 to 117 A.D.).

Before attempting to date the Stanegate, it is appropriate to review the evidence for the road, because it is far from complete. Moreover, for much of what is known, the dating lacks precision or may be uncertain. The dating evidence will be summarised first.

DATING EVIDENCE

It is the western half of the Stanegate that possesses the least precise or certain dating record. Between Carlisle and Haltwhistle Burn, the Stanegate runs close by at least six forts and fortlets, from which the dating evidence is as follows.

1. The fort at Church Brampton has received only a single exploratory excavation, by Richmond and Simpson in the 1930s. The uncovering of stone, rather than wooden, buildings was taken to suggest a Trajanic date, and pottery was found "strikingly like that of Haltwhistle Burn and Throp". However, the excavators recorded an earlier find of a coin of 88 B.C. in the churchyard within the fort.¹
2. The fortlet at Boothby was identified and investigated via a single trench made by Simpson in 1933. A ditch and remains of a rampart were disclosed, and the dating of pottery found in the ditch was considered to be consistent with that of Throp.²
3. The fort at Nether Denton has never been formally excavated. Finds have been recorded of coins from the Domitianic period (81 to 96 A.D.), along with Flavian—Trajanic pottery and Samian ware. In 1933, signs of Roman occupation were noted in a patch of ground on the south side of the road past the fort. Trenching to the north of the road revealed what were taken to be the southern ditch and rampart of the fort, and the pottery roundabouts was described as "decayed Samian and pre-Hadrianic coarse wares".³
4. The fortlet at Throp was excavated by Simpson in the early 1910s. The absence of Flavian pottery and the presence of pottery "similar to that of the earliest period of Hadrian's Wall", together with the proximity to the Stanegate, led to the deduction that the erection of the fortlet "was no more than 5 to 10 years before 120 A.D.". However, "5 or 6 pottery vessels clearly belonged to a much later period".⁴
5. The fort at Carvoran has never been fully excavated. In 1915 a bronze Domitianic corn measure was found just outside the fort.⁵ The discredited Emperor's name had partly been erased from the inscription on the measure, indicating that the artefact had seen use after the death of the Emperor in 96 A.D. However, from this evidence it is not possible to draw a conclusion about the initial date of occupation at the fort.

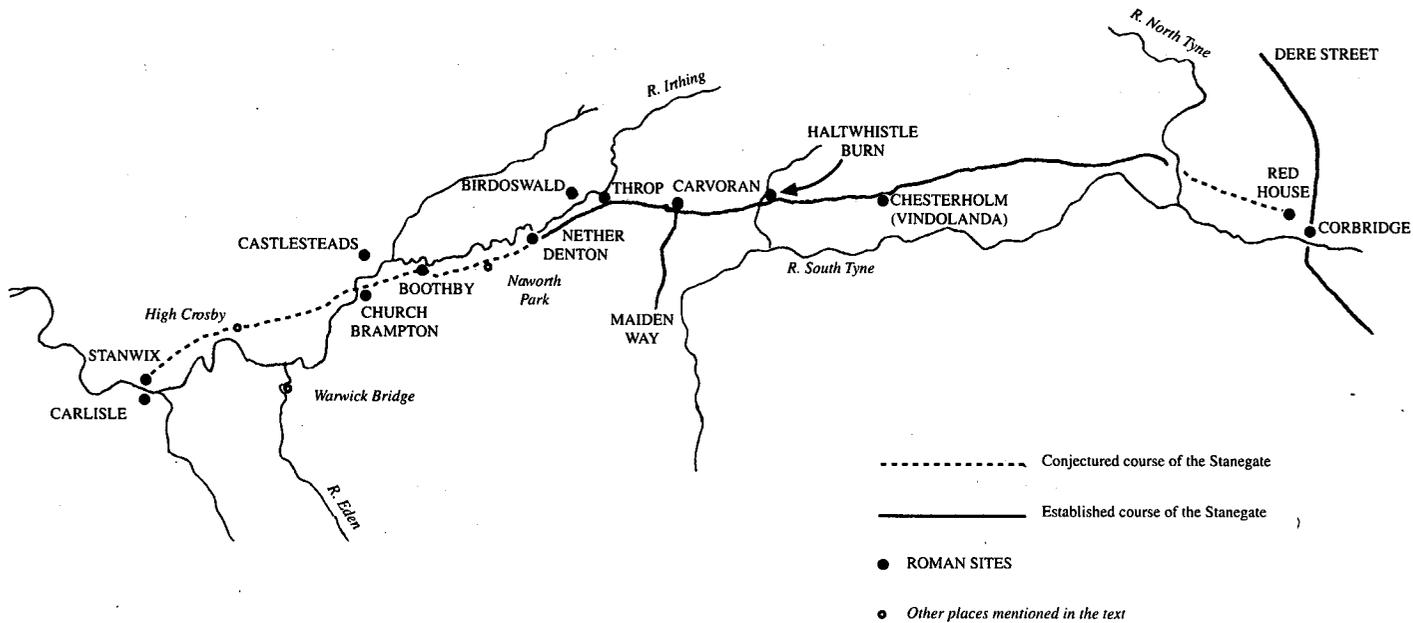


Fig. 1 Course of the Stanegate.

6. The fortlet at Haltwhistle Burn was excavated by Gibson and Simpson in 1907–1909. The pottery and coinage which were found were taken to indicate a Trajanic date.⁶
7. The presumed fortlet at Castlesteads has never been formally excavated, and little is known about it. It is situated to the north of the River Irthing, almost due north of Church Brampton. The Ordnance Survey map of Hadrian's Wall shows the Vallum curving to the south of the fortlet, apparently in order to include the site within the Wall zone. However, surface finds indicate a Trajanic date.⁷

In contrast to the uncertain dating of the western forts and fortlets, the records of excavations of the forts to the east of Haltwhistle Burn are much more recent, comprehensive, and specific with regard to dating.

8. The current excavation of the fort (Vindolanda) at Chesterholm has been in progress since 1970. The earliest evidence located so far indicates that the first fort was established in 85–86 A.D.⁸
9. The fort at Red House was excavated in advance of road construction in the 1970s. The site was shown to be an Agricolan foundation, which was given up when the fort at Corbridge was established some 1 km to the east.⁹
10. Excavations at Corbridge from 1947 to 1980 have shown that the first fort there was established in 86–87 A.D.¹⁰

Finally, at the supposed western end of the Stanegate, excavations in Carlisle since the 1970s have now shown, with the aid of dendrochronology, that the first fort there dated to 72–73 A.D.¹¹

To summarise: for the forts that are taken to be at each end of the Stanegate, and for one of the forts in between, modern and comprehensive excavations have provided datings which can be taken to be reasonably secure. For the three other intermediate forts, and all of the fortlets, the excavation record, if any, is

derived from the techniques and standards of 60 to 90 years ago. For most of the intermediate forts and fortlets along the Stanegate, therefore, the dating must be regarded as not necessarily precise or conclusive.

Having surveyed the unevenness of the dating evidence, consideration can now be given to the evidence for the road itself. Perhaps surprisingly, in view of the confidence with which the existence of the road is asserted, much of the course of the Stanegate is not known, or is questionable. Again, the western part of the route is the most uncertain.

UNCERTAINTIES ABOUT THE ROUTE OF THE STANEGATE

1. East of Throp, a single excavation by Simpson in 1910 provides the main evidence that the east–west course of the Stanegate turned south west at that point, in the direction of Nether Denton, rather than crossed to the north bank of the River Irthing nearby.¹² More recently, aerial photography has tended to confirm this interpretation, indicating the presence of a road running towards the southern side of the Nether Denton fort.¹³
2. West of Nether Denton, some scepticism may be allowed in accepting that the cuttings in Naworth Park and near Boothby are indeed of Roman construction. However, examinations were conducted by Richmond and Simpson in 1935,¹⁴ and by Richardson in the 1970s.¹⁵ Evidence of road construction was found in or close by the cuttings, although no Roman artefacts were recorded.
3. West of Church Brampton a possible course of the Stanegate has been traced to the north of the River Irthing. A cutting at High Crosby was excavated twice, in 1934 and 1935. In contrast to the absence of artefacts in Naworth Park and near Boothby, fragments of Hadrianic and early second century Samian pottery were found on the two occasions.¹⁶ Further west near Park Broom farm, excavation carried out in 1991

in advance of the laying of an ethylene pipeline revealed the cobbled surface of a road. This was taken to be part of the Stanegate, albeit that neither the width nor the manner of construction were typically Roman, and no Roman artefacts were found.¹⁷

It is possible, however, that this stretch west of Church Brampton, even if it should be Roman and have been built as part of the Stanegate, was constructed later. It is postulated that it might have been constructed in Hadrianic times (117 to 138 A.D.), following the establishment of the Wall fort at Stanwix, north of the River Eden. It has been suggested that the original (i.e. presumably pre Hadrianic) course of the Stanegate may have continued along the southern side of the River Irthing, past Church Brampton to near Warwick Bridge, before crossing the river Eden and thence continuing directly westwards to the fort at Carlisle.¹⁸ As yet, though, no evidence of a road has yet been found along this course.

Further, it has been observed that no milestones have been recorded along any of these stretches west of Throp.¹⁹

To summarise: although it is surmised that the Stanegate would have been constructed all of the way between Carlisle and Corbridge, it is only on the central and eastern part of the route, down to near the crossing of the River North Tyne, that the nature of the course appears to be firmly established. To the west, much of the course is either not known or can be questioned.

ANALYSIS OF THE EVIDENCE

Despite the foregoing uncertainties, the most likely sequence of events which emerges from the available evidence is:

1. in the immediate post-Agricolan period, the construction of forts at Corbridge, Chesterholm, and possibly Carvoran, Nether Denton, and Church Brampton
2. in Trajanic times, the construction of inter-

mediate fortlets at Haltwhistle Burn, Throp, and Boothby

3. also in Trajanic times, the reduction of the sizes of the existing forts listed in 1. Plausibly, this could have occurred at the same time as event 2, but there is no evidence either to confirm or to deny this.

Thus, along the course of the Stanegate, it is believed that

- the forts came first,
- the fortlets were added later,
- and that the forts were reduced in size, at possibly the same time.

Therefore, with regard to the relationship between the construction of the Stanegate and that of the forts and fortlets, three options may be considered:

- (a) that the Stanegate was built first, and the intermediate forts and fortlets were constructed alongside it subsequently
- (b) that the Stanegate was built to link at least some of the intermediate forts, and that the fortlets were constructed alongside it subsequently
- (c) that the Stanegate was built to link up the forts and the fortlets, either when the latter were being constructed, or else when they were already in existence.

These options can be appraised by examining the route of the road, and its relationship to the forts and fortlets beside it.

From both a study of the map²⁰ and on the ground, the planning of the route can be seen to lack, in general, the long distance alignments for which Roman roads are noted, even in difficult country. Rather, the Stanegate gives the appearance of having been constructed to link up the forts and fortlets by the most conveniently direct route between each of them.

In fact, the most notable feature of the road, where it is known, is the closeness with which it runs past each of the fortified sites. This applies as much to the fortlets as it does to the forts.

This is especially clear at Throp, for which the route makes a considerable diversion from a direct line between the forts at Nether Denton and Carvoran. There appears to be no topographical justification for such a diversion or choice of route.

It is less clear at Haltwhistle Burn. A direct line could not have been followed between the forts at Carvoran and Chesterholm because, at the point where the line would intersect the burn, there is a substantial ravine. Therefore a diversion to cross the burn would have been obligatory. However, the alignment which is taken east of Carvoran from Haltwhistle Common to the Haltwhistle Burn appears to be aimed throughout at the crossing of the burn so as to pass by the fortlet, rather than to be a diversion from a direct route to Chesterholm.

It may also be true at Boothby, where, if the cutting is indeed Roman, there would seem to be slender reason for choosing such a course, except to pass closer to the fortlet nearby.

Thus the Stanegate appears to link the forts and the fortlets equally. If the Stanegate had been built to link up just the forts, it would not have taken the route which it does. These observations therefore appear to rule out option (b).

Of the two remaining options, option (a) is what most people have assumed, i.e. that the road was built first. Indeed, for the route east of Carvoran, the assumption would be plausible. The course taken by the Stanegate from Carvoran to the crossing of the River North Tyne is a reasonably natural one. It is possible to argue that it would have been adopted by a road planner on topographical grounds alone. All the same, the line of the road past Haltwhistle Burn, and the descent to the Brackie's and Bradley Burns in front of the fort at Chesterholm, would, it is considered, be easier to explain if the fortlet and the fort had already been in existence.

However, it is to the west of Carvoran where the route appears to lack topographical justification. Between Throp and Church Brampton, the presumed line of the road seems to adopt a course keeping within approximately 1 km of the south bank of the

River Irthing. This incurs considerable physical difficulty for the road, which could easily have been avoided by keeping to the high ground less than 2 km to the south. This is demonstrated very clearly by the 1751-6 military road (the present A69) from Carlisle to Newcastle which takes an almost straight—and entirely practical—line across this ground. Not only is this road heading in the same general direction: as it happens, this road is aligned almost exactly upon Carvoran. Perhaps even more strikingly, the Carlisle to Newcastle railway maintains a virtually level²¹ and fairly direct course *between* the A69 and the Roman road, and it does so with few significant embankments or cuttings.

Thus, if the Stanegate had been planned simply as a road to link Carlisle with Red House or Corbridge, it is considered very unlikely that it would have taken the route which is ascribed to it, west of Carvoran. Most probably, it would have kept to the more direct and level ground to the south.

This would appear to rule out option (a). However, before discarding this option altogether, one more possibility must be considered.

As Hadrian's Wall was to do, a few years later, the original course of the Stanegate could have kept north of the River Irthing all the way from Carlisle until in the vicinity of Throp, and then crossed to the south bank of the river there. The established but puzzling change of direction of the Stanegate to the southwest at Throp could then be explained as the result of a later diversion, to take the road past the forts and fortlets at Church Brampton, Boothby, Nether Denton, and Throp when they were constructed.

The case has recently been argued for the existence of a Roman road running along the north bank of the River Irthing, to the west of the Wall fort at Birdoswald, prior to the construction of the Vallum.²² The only remains of a road which have been found, however, ran from the eastern porta quintana of the fort at Birdoswald, and are interpreted as being almost certainly contemporary with the construction of the fort.

Thus although such a route for the Stanegate cannot be ruled out, no firm evidence for it has yet been found. The main argument against such an original route for the Stanegate is that it is less direct than one keeping to the south, and appears to offer no advantage on the ground as we know it today.

On the basis of present evidence, therefore, option (a) appears to be unlikely. In other words, if the Stanegate had been built before the forts and fortlets, it is likely that it would have taken a different course from the one which is currently ascribed to it.

As documented at the beginning of this paper, much of the present evidence—both for the course of the road, and for the dating of the forts and fortlets along it—is far from conclusive. Moreover, it is unfortunate that the strongest arguments against option (a) are derived from the western section of the route, where the course of the road is least certain. But even on the central and eastern parts of the route, as already noted, the course would be rather easier to explain if the forts and fortlets had already been in existence.

Therefore, on the balance of what is known at present, option (c) appears to be more likely than option (a). In other words it appears more likely that the Stanegate as we know it was constructed to link up the forts and fortlets, than that it was built first and the forts and the fortlets were added to it later.

If this conclusion should be correct, the construction of the road could have occurred either when the fortlets were being built or else when they were already in existence. In either instance, on the basis of present evidence, this means that the Stanegate is most likely to have been constructed in Trajanic times.

Two other pieces of evidence may support this conclusion.

Firstly, an aerial photograph of the fort at Carvoran shows that the line of the Stanegate runs past the ramparts of the later, smaller fort, but apparently *across and inside* the line of the ramparts of an earlier, larger fort.²³ It therefore appears that the Stanegate was not built until after the larger fort had been

reduced in size. As already noted, this is presumed to be in Trajanic times.

Secondly, in one of the Vindolanda letters from Chesterholm, dated to about 102 A.D., there is a reference to the loading of cartloads of stone.²⁴ If, as the author of a commentary in *Current Archaeology* presumed, this was a reference to road building, then it is hard to imagine what the road would be, other than the Stanegate.²⁵

DISCUSSION

If the Stanegate had not been constructed until Trajanic times, it means that the line of forts between Carlisle and Corbridge may have existed for some 20 years without having a metalled connecting road. At first sight this would appear to be surprising. However, there is no indication that the contemporary line of forts from Dalswinston to Newstead ever had a connecting road at this time. Moreover, several of the recently-discovered Agricolan forts in the Scottish uplands do not appear to have been linked into a road network. Undoubtedly, the forts would have been in communication, but on the basis of the available evidence, it appears that, at that time at least, a connecting network of metalled roads may not have been considered the highest priority for the occupying forces.

This point may be examined via the following general hypothesis, which is offered for consideration.

HYPOTHESIS FOR THE DATING OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF ROMAN ROADS

It is postulated that there may, sometimes, have been quite extensive gaps in time between the laying out of Roman lines of communication, and the construction of metalled roads.

Especially when running through newly conquered, unfamiliar, and potentially hostile territory, lines of communication would need to

be established and kept open for the army at the front—for supply trains, for despatches, and for troop reinforcements and redeployments. It is projected that this would have been especially the case in northern England when, as in Agricola's time, the bulk of the army was campaigning 100 to 150 miles away in Scotland.

It is surmised that these lines of communication would need to be marked out, cleared, and patrolled, because of their importance. The marking out is likely to have been accomplished most readily from sighting point to sighting point, with a tendency to keep to high ground because it is easier to keep in view and is usually firmer underfoot.

It might be thought that constructing a metalled surface for such communications would have a high priority. However, for those using these lines of communication at the time, the physical difficulties of crossing the intervening land might have been less than the threats of hostile action or getting lost. The construction of a metalled road surface would make the communication easier and quicker, but it would not be *essential* to the communication. Therefore, with the possible exception of temporary structures across wet ground, road construction might be carried out retrospectively, when other priorities allowed. When the road construction did take place, it can be expected that it would follow the established lines of communication, deviating only where necessary to engineer the metalled road surface around an intermediate obstacle such as a ravine or a marsh.

If correct, this hypothesis would explain (a) the long-distance alignments typical of Roman roads in Britain, (b) their tendency to keep to high ground, and (c) their short distance deviations around obstacles, and (d) their returns to their long-distance alignments afterwards.²⁶

Two other observations appear to provide evidence to support this hypothesis.

Firstly, the route of Dere Street north of the River Tyne is clearly aligned on Corbridge, and not on the fort at Red House. Yet Corbridge is post Agricolan. Red house was the fort in Agricolan times. Therefore it would be

expected that the initial communications line would have run through or past the fort at Red House. However, there is no record of a road on this line. Consequently, it appears likely that the metalling of the present course of Dere Street was not carried out until post Agricolan times.

Secondly, in excavations conducted on the line of Dere Street to the south, at Piercebridge, "pottery sealed below the foundations of the earliest road indicated a construction date in the A.D. 90s".²⁷

With regard to the dating of the construction of the Stanegate, the general absence of long distance alignments along the route may imply that it was not a major line of communication during the early phases of the Roman occupation of the region. The need for a metalled road between Carlisle and Corbridge may only have become a priority when the fortlets were constructed, the existing forts were reduced in size, and, possibly, the area was beginning to acquire the status of a frontier.

REFERENCES

Abbreviations

AA³ *Archaeologia Aeliana, Series 3*

AA⁴ *Archaeologia Aeliana, Series 4*

AA⁵ *Archaeologia Aeliana, Series 5*

CW *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*

NOTES

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³ *Ibid.*, pp. 152–4.

⁴ F. G. Simpson, CW (1912), p. 370.

⁵ S. Johnson, *Hadrian's Wall* (English Heritage, 1989), pp. 27–8.

⁶ J. P. Gibson, F. G. Simpson, AA³, Vol. 5, p. 256.

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²¹ British Rail—Main Line Gradient Profiles, route NE13 (Ian Allan Ltd., London).

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²⁴ A. K. Bowman, J. D. Thomas: *The Vindolanda writing-tablets* (Tabulae Vindolandenses II), pp. 302–3, number 316.

²⁵ *Current Archaeology*, 128, March 1992, pp. 344–5.

²⁶ In reviewing the draft of this paper, Dr. N. Hodgson has drawn attention to the similarity of this hypothesis to the ideas of Dr. M. C. Bishop, of which the author had been unaware; see M. C. Bishop: “A new Roman military site at Rocliffe, North Yorkshire”, *Yorkshire Archaeological Society Roman Antiquities Section Bulletin*, 12 (1995), pp. 3–5.

²⁷ P. R. Scott: “Transactions of the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland”, 1982, p. 77

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